

**DECONSTRUCTING RACE:
THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AS AN
ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER**

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

ANDREW J. POLK

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
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Major: American Studies

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ABSTRACT

Deconstructing Race: The Civil Rights Movement
as an Encounter with the Other. (April 2004)

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This paper examines perspectives of four different leaders during the American Civil Rights era and discusses how the men employing each perspective defined and encountered the Other. One can define “the Other” as any person or group whom a human perceives as different in some way from himself, and the term “race” marks one complicated way of classifying self and other into specific groups. In dealing with the theoretical aspect of otherness, or alterity, this paper relies largely on the writings of Tzvetan Todorov and his assertion that an ethical understanding of the Other perceives it as both equal and different. By researching the rhetoric of two white leaders and two black leaders, I attempt to determine how race affected different views of the Other in 1960’s America. Robert Kennedy, John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, and Eugene “Bull” Connor each provide different opinions about how one should define and deal with the Other. As a powerful white man working within the establishment, Robert Kennedy was an important ally to Civil Rights leaders. However, Kennedy’s attempts to bring blacks into mainstream America often denied their difference. Both Carmichael and Connor approached their racial other as inferior and therefore violated Todorov’s requirement to see the Other as equal. Finally, John Lewis and his nonviolent philosophy did not define

the Other merely along racial lines. Although Lewis engaged in a sort of self-projection, his refusal to define alterity strictly according to race helps the observer to see that race may not work as a tool to explain human diversity. This issue holds major importance for America's past, present, and future because racism has long plagued the country and because encounters with otherness occur frequently in our global community. By understanding race as a false and arbitrary marker of human groups, one which does not truly reflect differences in mental processes and perspectives, scholars can hopefully begin to gain a fuller understanding of human diversity and how it functions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	8
THEORY.....	15
ROBERT KENNEDY.....	21
STOKELY CARMICHAEL.....	41
THEOPHILUS EUGENE “BULL” CONNOR.....	58
JOHN LEWIS.....	67
CONCLUSION.....	80
REFERENCES.....	86
VITA.....	89

INTRODUCTION

We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

The desire for any human to seek equality with his or her peers seems basic, as does the tendency to categorize people into different groups. Unfortunately, history has proven that problems often arise due to the ways in which one determines these categories. The exploitation and enslavement of some groups has stained the collective history of mankind, and the vestiges of those crimes still remain. Although threats of outright slavery and genocide do not plague most humans, cultural colonialism, devaluation, and oppression of certain groups still occur. As rapidly developing technology continues to catapult humans into an ever-shrinking world, intercultural encounters become increasingly more regular and important. One good way to face this situation is by looking to history and examining the successes and failures of past intercultural encounters. With these thoughts in mind, one must look first at the different traditions within his or her own country because to deal properly with different cultures abroad, humans first need to understand different cultures at home.

One physical characteristic that has created much controversy in America regarding human diversity is race. The enslavement of black people within America has caused far-reaching problems that still affect the ways that most citizens of the United States view people in general. The tensions resulting from racial relations in America

This thesis follows the style and format of the *MLA Handbook*.

came to a head in the 1960's when the struggle for equal rights moved to the forefront of the national scene. Although most histories claim that the Civil Rights era officially began with the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1954, many people such as Adam Clayton Powell and A. Phillip Randolph started fighting for equal rights years before the boycott. However, the Montgomery boycott did allow the movement to gain national attention. The next fifteen years would bring more boycotts, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, racist backlash, nonviolence, and Black Power, among other movements. The efforts both for and against equal rights would involve many people and many different leaders. By examining the philosophies and actions of four men who acted as public leaders during the American Civil Rights movement, I hope to uncover principles that may lead to an ethical understanding of race within America. More specifically, I argue that the different ways in which each of these four leaders viewed the Other exposes race itself as an illegitimate marker of human diversity while suggesting the development of different "racial cultures." To this end, I will examine the rhetoric of each individual leader while attempting to show parallels and disparities between the differing understandings of the Other and to determine the ethical successes and failures of each perspective. Before beginning this analysis, a few words introducing and explaining the characters and theory upon which I have based my study will be appropriate.

The four leaders I have chosen for this study are Robert Kennedy, John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, and Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor. Each of these men played an integral role in the movement, whether for or against it, and all of them entertained different interpretations of how to understand and react to the Other. John Lewis and

Stokely Carmichael worked together as two of the movement's outstanding black leaders in an organization called the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee, but eventually the two men disagreed on how to accomplish the movement's goals, thus creating a split in the organization. Lewis adhered to a policy of nonviolence while Carmichael advocated the Black Power movement. Connor and Kennedy, both white men in politics, differed widely in their approaches to Civil Rights. An outspoken southern racist, Connor reacted violently to protestors in Birmingham, while Kennedy showed sympathy towards the movement, and ended up as one of the blacks' strongest advocates in Washington. By analyzing the actions and rhetoric utilized by these four men, I attempt to uncover the relationship between each man's understanding of the Other and his actions toward the Other. I assert that each one of these men did not proceed blindly in dealing with the question of Civil Rights, but, rather, the four of them assigned four different identities to themselves, their group, and groups of others, which led to four separate courses of action.

Not only did each of these men have a large impact on the course of the Civil Rights movement, but they also represent four unique perspectives. Each of these four men held a certain view of equality and proposed different ways to reach, or prevent, blacks from achieving it. Kennedy, Carmichael, and Lewis each sought to gain equal rights for the black race, although, Carmichael asserted separationism as the best way to proceed, while Lewis and Kennedy each sought slightly different forms of integration. Bull Connor explicitly argued against equality, maintaining that white people should retain their privileged status. By studying these four leaders, one can see dramatically

different perspectives within men of the same race. John Lewis and Stokely Carmichael disagreed philosophically, as did Bull Connor and Robert Kennedy. Although the four individuals chosen for this study are all men, I do not want to assert that female voices and perspectives do not have importance in discussing either human diversity or Civil Rights. However, I have chosen these men as representative of the major viewpoints that affected the course of the American Civil Rights movement. The general lack of women in the leadership of this time period has implications far beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this discussion, these individuals provide a sampling of both racially and ideologically diverse worldviews.

In order to study these perspectives, I have chosen to focus my research on the rhetoric of each leader. By “rhetoric” I generally mean verbal or written communication. This emphasis allows the men to “speak for themselves” to some extent. Although I recognize that there are ideological decisions implicit in each piece of rhetoric chosen for this project, where possible I have made an effort to allow the speakers to prove their own philosophies. The use of recorded verbal and written communication allows primary texts to create the foundation for this project, and attempts to ground it in history. Furthermore, people often associate rhetoric with persuasion. According to Aristotle, one of the first rhetorical theorists, it is “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Parrish 42). Each of these leaders attempted to persuade different audiences, often including the American public at large, either for or against the importance of equal rights and the different ways of achieving those ends. Because of the moral nature of this topic, each man had to

clearly understand and articulate the basic philosophies underlying his argument. Therefore, within the writings and utterances of each figure, one finds the reasons and convictions from which arose specific actions. Understanding the basic philosophies and perspectives of the men chosen for this study is vital in applying a theoretical paradigm.

The main theorist upon which I have relied in this project is Tzvetan Todorov. In his book *On Human Diversity*, Todorov discusses the different methods for determining differences among human groups and asserts an ethical model for encountering the Other, or what he terms “alterity.” For the purposes of this paper I will use “alterity” and “the Other” to refer to the general and abstract human entity that one understands as essentially different from oneself. The lowercase version of this term, “other,” I will reserve for specific groups of people that one sees as different or to which one stands in opposition. For the sake of diversity, I will use terms such as “in group” and “out group” as interchangeable with “self” and “other.” In discussing these concepts, Todorov recounts some of the ways in which humans have viewed diversity in the past. One system that he discusses specifically is racialism, which states that the races are inherently and biologically different, and that one race, the white race, also holds an innate superiority over other races (Todorov *Diversity* 93). Todorov claims that humanity needs an ethical standard toward which to strive in encountering other cultures, and the basic system that he offers includes understanding the other as equal and different, as he discusses in another book, *The Conquest of America* (76).

The ethical system that Todorov offers transcends any one historical period. In other words, Todorov attempts to create a standard by which one can judge any historical moment and upon which one can base future actions. This theory for ethically encountering the Other is one made for practical use. By examining history, scholars hope to affect the world of experience today. I employ Todorov's ethical system in this study because it attempts to choose the most tolerant and least violent attitude toward alterity. By asserting that one must see other cultures as equal to one's own culture, Todorov flirts with cultural relativism. However, he avoids this trap by asserting a universal ethical standard. Any system that calls for equality, and therefore tolerance, faces the danger of those who would claim that a truly tolerant person must allow hatred and violence. However, this argument engages in circular logic. By its very nature, a philosophy of tolerance and equality must denounce intolerance and hierarchy. The only attitudes and cultures that Todorov's ethical framework does not respect are those that belittle or deny the Other. His outline attempts to minimize racism, violence, hatred, and the extinguishing of unique cultures. Because this system sets up an ahistorical standard, one can apply it to moments throughout history. Therefore, the disparity in time between the subject of Todorov's book *The Conquest of America*, which discusses European colonialism in the Americas, and this study of the 1960's American Civil Rights movement does not invalidate the theory but rather reinforces it. The standard is applicable in both situations. Indeed, if it is accurate, as I argue it is, it is applicable in many more circumstances, and for that reason I have chosen to employ it in this project. I will go on to discuss this theory further before I begin my analysis of Kennedy,

Carmichael, Connor, and Lewis, but first I will examine the context in which each man lived and spoke in order to understand more fully the significance of their attitudes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1960's in America marked a time of turmoil as the nation experienced growing pains. Not only did many citizens find the nation's involvement in Vietnam questionable at best, but at home, another great dilemma engaged Americans in the form of the Civil Rights movement. Many people in the 1960's fought to ensure the equal rights of each American, and most of the protestors had little or no political power to enact change. In order to gain strides toward equality, disenfranchised agitators needed to convince those in power of the importance their cause. One man who worked within the established order to help ensure equality was Robert Kennedy. As the brother of President John F. Kennedy, Robert's political role was complicated. One element that one must take into account when analyzing the rhetoric of Robert Kennedy, or any public figure, is politics. Any time that the attorney general spoke on the so-called "race problem" in America, he had a broad audience, consisting of Afro-Americans, white Americans, liberals, conservatives, and even racists, to appease. While attempting to affect public policy, Kennedy also had to keep up the image of the administration. With the Civil Rights movement gaining momentum in the early 1960's, many Civil Rights leaders began to put increasing pressure on the Kennedy administration to take active steps in securing rights for all American citizens. Furthermore, Civil Rights leaders began to attack the administration for appointing segregationist jurists to federal judgeships in the South (Guthman and Allen 83).

In spite of all the political difficulties of convincing the nation of the importance of Civil Rights, Kennedy took many actions to advance that cause. The attorney general took an active role in helping James Meredith become the first black person admitted to University of Mississippi, attempting to convince Ross Barnett, Mississippi's governor, to stop resisting court orders to enroll Meredith (Guthman and Allen 89). Furthermore, Robert Kennedy and his brother worked to draft a Civil Rights bill. Although the bill would not pass until 1964, under the name the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the attorney general fought for its passage throughout 1963: "Robert Kennedy led the administration's fight in Congress, appearing before the House Judiciary Committee on June 26 and October 15, the Senate Commerce Committee on July 1, and the Senate Judiciary Committee on July 18 and August 23. On each occasion he argued for the bill with a mass of evidence of discriminatory practices and with a powerful moral plea. . ." (Guthman and Allen 97-8). Both the president and his attorney general saw the need for action and the constraining political risks involved with Civil Rights legislation, and they continued to argue for its importance. While Robert Kennedy and a few others pushed for equality within the parameters of the establishment, the masses began to mobilize and demonstrate in the streets.

As America tried to understand the impact of current events, students began to take an active role in the social movement. In fact, one of the most important national organizations, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), developed under the supervision of Ella Baker in 1960. According to Howard Zinn, the formation of SNCC marked "the first time in our history a major social movement, shaking the

nation to its bones, [was] led by youngsters” (Zinn 1). As students from college campuses around the country dedicated themselves to the movement, SNCC quickly became one of the driving forces behind the fight for Civil Rights. Early members of the organization, such as John Lewis, dedicated themselves to nonviolent protests, but their nonviolent means did not deter their enthusiasm to gain freedom. Mass demonstrations held all over the nation would never have occurred if not for the many student volunteers, and students also headed major Civil Rights events such as the Freedom Rides and the sit-in movement. With the formation of SNCC, the Civil Rights campaign accelerated. The nation even began to see more of its white population contributing to the demonstrations as equal rights advocates of all ages, genders, and ethnicities fought nonviolent battles on many fronts in the name of freedom.

One major front for the Civil Rights movement in America was Birmingham, Alabama. According to Lee Bains, “during the early 1960’s, Birmingham Alabama was a city in which the leaders of both races refused to seriously challenge the racial status quo” (233). However, the situation quickly changed when nonviolent protestors came to Birmingham in 1963. After several attempts to gain concessions from white businesses, including more jobs and fair pay for black workers, the black leaders in Birmingham combined with Dr. Martin King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Coalition (SCLC) to organize a protest which they called “D-Day.” On this day in May, 1963, the protestors rallied hundreds of school children in the area into nonviolently marching into downtown Birmingham. The police eventually ran out of patrol wagons to arrest the children and began using school buses to carry the children to juvenile detention. The

next day, May 3rd, Dr. King declared a "Double D-Day." Again waves of school children marched into the streets, but this time Bull Connor came ready to act (Bains 180-1).

Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor was the Public Safety Commissioner in Birmingham in 1963 and had a long history of racism both politically and personally. In 1942 Connor wrote a letter to President Roosevelt detailing his apprehension on the loss of white power in the South:

When the downfall of the doctrine of white supremacy is advocated and taught by agitators and federal officials, who know absolutely nothing about the Negro problem in the South, what happens? Negroes become impudent, unruly, arrogant, law-breaking, violent and insolent... Amalgamation of the races will result in lawlessness, disunity and probable bloodshed. (Bains 187)

Connor's racism, along with that of the other city commissioners, led to a very tense racial situation within Birmingham, Alabama, which came to a head in 1963. On the second day that the children marched, Bull Connor ordered his men to use police dogs and high-powered fire hoses on the protestors. This extreme violence exacted upon not only nonviolent protestors but children as well, shocked the nation and showed many people that the issue of racial equality would not simply and quietly go away. The struggle for Civil Rights would involve a long, difficult battle.

The movement made major gains when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited both racial and gender discrimination in employment practices (Chafe, 139), and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voter registration (Carson, 35). However, true equality still lay far in the future. Even after the Voting Rights Act many southern counties still refused to register black voters.

The momentum that the movement had built over the past five or ten years created urgency for Civil Rights speakers in 1966 because black leaders had to capitalize on the recent developments in Congress, or they would lose momentum and the legislation may prove ineffective. Because of this urgency, some blacks felt that the strategy of nonviolence would no longer work. By using nonviolent means, protestors had gained many victories, but often those accomplishments took months of large scale and exhausting mass action. Black people wanted freedom now; therefore, some began to turn to new alternatives.

One alternative came in the form of the Black Power movement. As the Civil Rights movement advanced into the '60's, some people began to take a more militant approach in their demand of freedom. In Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1966, Stokely Carmichael first introduced the term Black Power. Stokely was one of several Civil Rights leaders conducting a march through Mississippi that James Meredith had begun. Although no one ever clearly defined the term "Black Power," it came from the notion of "Black Consciousness," which, according to Cleveland Sellers, a student protestor and ally of Carmichael, was "an attitude, a way of seeing the world" (156). "Black Consciousness...forced us to begin the construction of a new black value system. A value system geared to the unique cultural and political experience of blacks in this country" (Sellers and Terrell 156-7). The message of Black Power in some ways stood in stark contrast to the nonviolence practiced by Martin King, John Lewis, and others, and the differing ideologies divided the movement and its followers.

More specifically, the differences between nonviolence and Black Power caused a split among SNCC members. The long time national chairman, John Lewis, had adhered to nonviolence ever since his involvement with the Civil Rights movement began, and he never accepted the message of Black Power. In his autobiography he states, "I didn't – and I don't – have any sympathy with black nationalism, separatism, the attitude of an eye for an eye or violence of any sort" (204). However, many SNCC members disagreed with Lewis, and thought that he "had been in office too long and that his ideas no longer represented those of the majority of the organization's member's" (Sellers and Terrell 158). In May of 1966, SNCC members voted Stokely Carmichael in as the new national chairperson and replaced John Lewis. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had began a new chapter in the organization's life as the proponents of both nonviolence and Black Power struggled for the support of Civil Rights advocates in general and SNCC members in particular.

The division between these two ideologies complicated the exigence of the rhetorical situation in which both John Lewis and Stokely Carmichael found themselves. According to Lloyd Bitzer, any use of rhetoric occurs within a specific rhetorical situation which has three specific aspects: audience, constraints, and exigence (65). Any effective rhetor will make sure to adapt his message style to his audience, while the situational constraints (setting, crowd noise, etc.) will partly dictate the speaker's style as well. Finally Bitzer claims that the exigence, "an imperfection marked by urgency," constitutes the main obstacle that prompts the rhetorician to speak at all; the speaker's main purpose lies in remedying the exigence (63). Not only did the momentum of the

movement require quick action to exploit fully the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but also as many black people wavered between two paths toward freedom. The rhetors felt the urgent need to explain why their respective theories could provide the best opportunity for blacks to achieve equality. During this time, each rhetorical work that the men offered had to negotiate two specific audiences, and this negotiation became the major constraint for every address that they gave or wrote. Both Lewis and Carmichael spoke to the conscience of white America, explaining the need for freedom, and they also had to convince the black community of their respective ideological convictions. Through the rhetoric that emerged from this complicated situation, both Lewis and Carmichael attempted to redefine the lines of alterity, or Otherness, concerning the Civil Rights movement.

THEORY

To fully understand the arguments offered in this paper, one must recognize the theoretical basis for those arguments. The theories that this paper engages include, nonviolence, Black Power, differing race theories, and Tzvetan Todorov's theories on the ethical encounter with the other. Instead of asserting a universal ethic for dealing with the Other, which lies well beyond the scope of this discussion, the author will rely on the theory set forth by Todorov. By explaining these concepts, this section will provide a connection between the historical and theoretical aspects of the overall paper. Today's scholars must investigate the context of different histories as they try to negotiate means of improving present-day society. This paper will examine parts of the American Civil Rights movement as a way of dealing with and defining the Other.

All humans and human groups must deal with alterity – the relationship with the Other. One must first realize that, according to Todorov, the only truly ethical understanding of the other requires one “to recognize [the other] both as equal and as different” (76). Seeing the difference between oneself and another does not constitute a full understanding of alterity unless one combines that difference with a notion of equality. People have long debated where and how to draw the lines of human diversity, “trying to discover whether we form a single species or several” (Todorov *Diversity* 1). No scholar will deny the fact that human groups exist, but the question is why do those human groups exist, and how do people define them. Although some divisions between humans seem clear cut, others are vague and undefined. Some may claim that

differences purely relate to biological characteristics, others would assert that most human differences are mainly cultural. As the reader will later see, the question between biological and cultural differences played a major role in the split between adherents to the philosophies of nonviolence and Black Power during the Civil Rights movement.

By setting definite parameters around human diversity, people determine how to understand themselves and others. In other words, each person defines what he or she considers his or her in and out groups. In groups involve anyone that a person considers like himself/herself, and those people that one sees as different comprise the out group. Once one defines these groups, the next step involves interacting with the out group, or the Other. Although many people throughout history have neglected to even attempt to deal with the Other ethically, recent scholars have focused on how to accomplish this task. One obstacle that deters many people from ethically dealing with the other involves ethnocentrism, which is defined by Todorov as “the unwarranted establishing of the specific values of one’s own society as universal values” (*Diversity* 1). Ethnocentrism does not involve supporting one system of values over another. Rather, a person who lives ethnocentrically fails even to realize the existence of other systems of values or thought processes. Todorov cites a particularly clear example of ethnocentrism, also called egocentrism, in his book *The Conquest of America* when he explains the overall European reaction to the Indians of America. In the book, Europeans, such as Christopher Columbus, do not attempt to understand the Indian value system as different from their own: “What is denied is the existence of a human subject truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself”

(Todorov *Conquest* 42). The fault of the Europeans was not an isolated event, but it serves as one example of a failure to conceive the other as different.

Once one recognizes the other as different, another step must take place: seeing the other as equal. The implications of perceiving the other as equal have clear ties to the Civil Rights campaign, which is predicated on the very notion of equality. People often accept the other as different only to label them as inferior. The hierarchical categorization of people presents itself in many forms both today and throughout history, but the issue of race stands out as an oft used tool for constructing a system of superiority. For many Europeans, the Amerindians were a far inferior race or culture than their own (Todorov *Conquest* 160). Another glaring example of a constructed hierarchy results from racist thought: "Racism is a movement of ideas born in Western Europe whose period of flowering extends from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth" (Todorov *Diversity* 91), and its philosophy states that not only do the races inherently differ, but some races have inherent superiority to others (93). Here, I will dedicate a few words to the concept of race in general.

Recently, scholars have devoted much effort to defining and explaining the idea of race, which has played a major role in American history. Many theories exist on how individuals and society do define, and should define, "race," and according to *Critical Race Theory*, by Kimberle Crenshaw et al., "Critical Race Theory...includes a wide diversity of methodology and approach" (59). To comprehend how race has functioned in America, one must first understand that "the concept of race is not scientific, [but] it is a sociocultural concept...based on biological features of humans" (Spears 17). Many

problems plague any attempt to put humans into neatly defined categories based on any criteria, but defining human groups according to sets of vague physical characteristics proves even more problematical. Although scholars have long called the concept of race into question, its ideas have effected how people have viewed human diversity throughout history, and racial factors clearly played a key role in the split between the nonviolent and Black Power philosophies of the 1960's.

Nonviolent theories characterized a large part of the Civil Rights movement, especially in the early '60's. By adhering to nonviolence, many activists taught that the white man did not necessarily constitute the enemy, but all Americans needed to fight the evil of injustice. According to a personal interview with Rev. James Bevel, one of the major leaders of the movement and proponent of nonviolence today, nonviolence teaches that "every living human being is my brother or sister," and any opposition is simply "a disagreement between brothers." One who believes in nonviolence does not seek only to win but to find truth. Bevel takes the stance of nonviolence a step beyond physical violence by saying that "anger is violence. Anger itself is the first action of violence toward another person." As a philosophy, nonviolence teaches love for the person committing the wrong, and it claims that no other course of action will bring about change: "You can defer the problem into the future by killing people, [but] only by healing and educating can you effect change" (Bevel).

In many ways, the philosophy of Black Power stands in contrast to nonviolence. Although no one ever clearly articulated the exact theory behind Black Power, people did discern certain principles that it taught. The theory of Black Power taught that

blacks in America needed to identify more closely as a race, and if they wanted power, then they would have to take it by any means necessary. Black Power promoted a new value system that focused on the black experience and helped blacks to understand “the imperialistic aspects of domestic racism” (Sellers and Terrell 157) by relating their own “struggle to the one being waged by Third World revolutionaries in Africa, Asia and Latin America” (Sellers and Terrell 157). One problematic issue for those who preached this philosophy manifested itself in the question of what to do with whites in the movement. Black Power revolved around race, not just common ideals, and as the number of adherents to this theory began to grow, a clear divide both in the Civil Rights movement in general and between John Lewis and Stokely Carmichael in particular became obvious.

This division within the movement provides only one example of the inconsistencies that one finds within this portion of American history. Many black leaders disagreed on specific tactics and basic philosophies in fighting for equality, and white leaders often argued over how to deal with the protestors. Robert Kennedy and Bull Connor represent the white counterpart of the nonviolence/Black Power controversy. These differing opinions raise interesting questions when one attempts to understand the ways in which people understood and acted toward their perceived other. One question in particular involves the role of race in each person’s understanding of alterity. This discussion will examine the similarities and differences between the four men mentioned above, including their methods and philosophies within the Civil Rights

context, in order to uncover the role of race in dealing with the Other. I first turn to an inspection of a major Civil Rights advocate, the attorney general.

ROBERT KENNEDY

In his *Day of Affirmation Address*, given on June 7, 1966 in South Africa, Robert Kennedy reveals his inability to understand the African struggle for freedom as fully separate from the struggle in America. Kennedy begins his speech by explaining his reason for coming to South Africa to speak:

I came here because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through energetic application of modern technology; a land which once imported slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America. (Gottheimer 283)

Kennedy cannot divorce his view of African struggles from his own worldview. In fact, he does not even recognize the fact that another nation, another continent even, might operate under a separate mental framework from his own. The only reason for Kennedy to come and inspire students from Africa in their struggle for freedom is that he loves the United States. Kennedy does not simply recognize the South African situation as parallel to America's circumstances. Rather, when he looks at South Africa, he sees America. He cannot escape his own frame of mind because, in his mind, no other systems exist. Although the struggle for freedom in America in the 1960's does seem to parallel the struggle in Africa, Kennedy saw more. For the attorney general, the struggle in Africa reaffirmed his sense of Americanness. He stated that "the enlargement of liberty for individual human beings must be the supreme goal and the abiding practice of

any Western society" (Gottheimer 283). In other words, the goal of any Western society should revolve around becoming more like America. In Kennedy's mind and rhetoric, America clearly stands as the metonym for the West and Western thought. As the great democratic experiment, the United States also stood for liberty for individuals. Therefore, attaining Western freedom means assimilating to American values. In this way, Kennedy reaffirms his identity as an American by delivering his speech in South Africa. He has bolstered his own sense of nationalism and spoken of the United States and its character in terms of the African situation. He has quite literally come "here because of my deep interest and affection for...the United States".

Robert Kennedy takes a complicated approach to the Other. In some ways Kennedy acted as one of the biggest proponents of Civil Rights within the establishment. He not only worked to protect both black and white protestors throughout the movement, as he did for the Freedom Riders, but he also was instrumental in passing legislation to broaden the scope of Civil Rights, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Kennedy did not always take the most popular political and moral stances toward black people and Civil Rights in the 1960's, which suggests that his motives did not revolve solely around his own political advancement or even that of his brother. However, Robert Kennedy did strongly trust in the American governmental system: "This American system of ours . . . gives each and every one of us a great opportunity if we only seize it with both hands and make the most of it" (Guthman and Allen 101). If he had the power to make a stand he did, but Kennedy showed an extreme hesitance to test the border of his allotted power as attorney general. Rather than quickly dispatching federal troops at the threat of

violence to protestors in the south, the attorney general took great pains to procure the cooperation of state and local governments. For example, he spent much energy attempting to convince Governor Barnett of Mississippi to accept court orders to allow James Meredith to register at the University of Mississippi before taking strong federal action. Actually receiving cooperation from these governments presented a difficult task because most often state and local officials not only held strong racist opinions, but had constituents that supported and expected those opinions, especially when it came time to vote. Kennedy's insistence on working strictly within the system raises interesting questions about his relationship with the Other. He seemed to support Civil Rights and equality for black people, but by perpetuating and working within an admittedly oppressive system, did Kennedy truly attempt to change the situation of the other? In other words, did Kennedy, although unconsciously, support superficial change in order to placate black people and maintain the hierarchy already in place? More broadly, can working within an unethical and oppressive system ever truly lead to a new relationship to the Other or must one attempt to create an altogether new social order?

Here, one must note that Kennedy's failure to fully perceive the Other was unintentional. The attorney general's work in the area of Civil Rights, such as protecting the Freedom Riders and maintaining consistent contact with Martin Luther King, Jr., displays a sincere desire to help black people gain equal rights. Kennedy truly wanted to see Civil Rights realized, and his efforts were not superficial attempts aimed at covering underlying motives. However, good intentions alone could not allow him to sufficiently understand and deal with the Other, and Kennedy does not represent the only example of

such a situation. In his book *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov, discusses the a Spanish missionary named Bartolomé de Las Casas. Todorov juxtaposes Las Casas with Hernando de Cortez in order to show different approaches to the other, in this case the Amerindians of the New World. Like Kennedy, Las Casas wants to help the Indians. He not only attempts to proselytize the “savages,” but he intercedes on their behalf when the conquistadors come to exploit and attack. Las Casas defends the Indians by claiming that they have the potential to become Christians and take on other European characteristics (Todorov *Conquest* 167). The missionary works hard to end the brutality that the inhabitants of the New World experience at the hands of the Europeans, and he clearly displays a genuine concern for them. When placed next to the conquistadors such as Cortez who violently murder and rape these people, Las Casas stands out as a virtuous and loving person. However, simply because he treats the Indians better than most Europeans does not mean that he has dealt with them in a completely ethical manner. Las Casas still denies the difference of the Indians from their Old World counterparts, believing that they can become more like the Europeans. The missionary clearly wants to do all that he can to help these new friends, and he does not appear to have any ulterior motive. In fact, much of his motivation comes from his faith, and he attempts to ensure both the physical and spiritual safety of these people, hoping to convert the Indians to Christianity. In Todorov’s mind, the conversion of the Indians, both culturally and religiously, will save them. However, even the well intentioned acts of Las Casas work to erase the Amerindian culture. The missionary wants the Indians to

become European and Christian, but this desire inadvertently denies the value of the people and culture which it seeks to transform.

Similarly, Kennedy truly wants to see black people brought into mainstream American culture. However, his intentions are misguided. As this essay will argue, the attorney general's attempts to grant Civil Rights to black people deny the difference and the value of their specific culture as distinct from mainstream white America. One cannot blame Kennedy for his efforts to facilitate the realization of Civil Rights. In fact, when compared to the George Wallaces and "Bull" Connors of the 1960's, Robert Kennedy deserves applause. However, scholars must at least discuss the legitimacy of a mentality that allowed Kennedy to fight for a version of "equal" rights that denied the value in black culture.

By attempting to liberate blacks within an inherently oppressive social system, rather than attacking the system itself, Robert Kennedy showed an essential misunderstanding of the other. Although some might argue that one must work within a certain system in order to change it, Kennedy fails to perceive that inherent flaws may exist within his present framework. According to Todorov, to ethically encounter alterity one must see the other as both different and equal (*Conquest* 76), and the obvious ways to misinterpret the other include: 1.) seeing alterity as inferior – different but not equal, or 2.) seeing alterity as a projection of oneself – equal but not different. However, both ways of failing to fully perceive the Other can occur to varying degrees. The options do not simply boil down to three: ethical, hierarchical, appropriating (or self-projection). Instead, one might view the encounter with the other as an ethical

continuum, one end representing the error of total hierarchy and the other representing the error of complete appropriation. At one end (appropriation), a person will deny existence of alterity at all, projecting a self-image, or potential self-image, upon the Other. At the other end of the spectrum, the hierarchical end, one will perceive the Other as different but inherently and inescapably inferior. The goal of ethically encountering the other stands in the center of the continuum where equality and difference coincide. Missing the middle by slightly erring to the side of hierarchy, as in Kennedy's case, does not place one in the same position as that of the vicious southern racists. However, simply because Kennedy seems to land closer to the ideal center of the continuum does not mean that scholars should not scrutinize his actions and question his approach to the Other. Rather, because the attorney general's efforts seem to come closer to achieving an ethical understanding of alterity, writers should examine his shortcomings all the more closely.

By using the current social system to achieve "equality" for blacks, Kennedy seems to show a misunderstanding of the other that falls to the side of hierarchy. With two hundred years of racism and slavery embedded in the social hierarchy of America, the attorney general, the president, even Congress could not simply legislate the equality of every person. The *Declaration of Independence* explicitly states that "all men are created equal," but even that founding document did not ensure equality in actuality – partially because its creators had power to define the word "men" in a specific way. Kennedy's refusal to attack the American social system seems to betray a hidden attitude of superiority. Black people operated with an acute sense of urgency. They knew that

the Civil Rights movement had begun to gain momentum that needed to be capitalized on if full equality would ever become a reality. Kennedy and others in power had the luxury to move slowly within a system doomed to failure; these men could not comprehend the situation of blacks in America, and it seemed that the white hierarchy would always remain impenetrable. In an address delivered to the American Jewish Committee in which Kennedy honored Judge Thurgood Marshall, the attorney general spoke of the Civil Rights campaign, saying, "We need men of his caliber in this struggle – which, in my opinion is the paramount internal issue in this country and which must be fought and won within the framework of our democratic system. . ." (Guthman and Allen 84). Robert Kennedy understood the importance of the problem, yet he continued to insist on the value of the "democratic system" – a system that had consistently subjugated blacks since America's birth. America had officially abolished slavery nearly one hundred years before Robert Kennedy was appointed attorney general and still not much had changed for blacks in America. American society remained steeped in prejudice and racism, and Kennedy's continued refusal to reform the racist social system, choosing, rather, to work within it, seems to reflect an implicit approval of its racism. If Kennedy wanted to establish true equality, he would have to advocate the acceptance and valuing of black people and black culture, rather than simply inviting blacks to take part in white culture. Kennedy precludes total racial equality because the hierarchical system that he works within demands that one race should maintain superiority over the other. In order to step outside of the current social order, Kennedy would have to deny that the mainstream American lifestyle represents the standard to

which one should strive. Instead, he would promote each culture or lifestyle as praiseworthy and important.

In his dealings both with individual people and large protest groups Kennedy always defended the system. When white racists killed three young activists in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Kennedy talked to the parents of two of these young men saying “that we have a system in which the primary responsibility for law enforcement is at the state and local level” (Guthman and Shulman 99). Therefore, Kennedy did not have much power to enforce the law and to find and persecute the perpetrators. Even in the face of these extremely difficult circumstances Kennedy defended the American system and the way in which it proceeded. To Kennedy, the lives of these individuals and the tragic way in which they ended represented flaws in the system that legislators and other government officials could eventually work out. Kennedy not only defended the system in that particular instance to the parents of the victims, but in retrospect he said he still believed that he was right on a larger scale:

In my judgment Mississippi is going to work itself out, and Alabama is. Now, maybe it's going to take a decade and maybe a lot of people are going to be killed in the meantime. And that's unfortunate. But in the long run I think it's for the health of the country and the stability of the system. It's the best way to proceed. (Guthman and Shulman 100)

Again Kennedy shows an impenetrable loyalty to “the system,” and his assurance that racism can work itself out seems ludicrous. Slavery did not simply work itself out; a nation split itself in two and fought a war before the end of slavery could become reality, but the insistence on the greatness of the system persists. Surely Kennedy had to understand how unfair and oppressive the American

system was to any minority voice. How could he overlook the impossibly slow changes won on behalf of minorities, women, and other marginalized people? He claims that “it’s the best way to proceed,” but who deemed this way the “best way?” Clearly, Civil Rights advocates thought the current path to equality presented a slow and inefficient way to make social changes. These leaders would most definitely not deem the system that they dealt with “the best way to proceed.” The system proved best for protecting the system and thus those who already had power. Kennedy did not insist on maintaining the system simply because he wanted whites to remain in power. Rather, for him, the fundamental criteria used for measuring the best system were universal. That all groups might not share those criteria does not seem to have occurred to the attorney general. Therefore, he does not practice and perpetuate racism as much as he denies the realities, needs, and worldview of the other race.

Although Kennedy’s actions seem to betray an air of superiority and concern for a way of life rather than for a human group, Kennedy’s true motives become apparent by further studying his rhetoric during his term as attorney general. During this time Kennedy traveled throughout the world delivering speeches dealing with many topics, often including the Civil Rights movement. The attorney general’s speeches reveal that his goals did not include the continual subjection of blacks to a white hierarchical system. Instead, he attempted to appropriate blackness into the white hierarchy. In other words, he did not err on the side of domination but of appropriation, thus denying the difference, not the equality, of black people. Kennedy often exhorts his listeners to

understand and help protect what he calls “the essential humanity of men” so that “government must answer – not just to the wealthy, not just to those of a particular religion, or a particular race, but to all its people” (Gottheimer 283). At first, his words seem to celebrate the different voices to which governments must respond, but instead, Kennedy denies difference altogether. Rather than having many voices that create a discourse in the public realm, Kennedy envisions one voice that stands for all people and their “essential humanity.” By saying these words, the attorney general denies black people the very freedom they seek – to have their voice heard. He does not seek to perpetuate a hierarchical system, but to appropriate blackness in white culture so that no hierarchy exists. His solution would erase the black voice in the name of unity, and his defense of American democracy shows that the one voice would not change as a result of the acceptance of black culture, but the dominant white voice would simply speak on behalf of all citizens.

Kennedy wants to correct the problems that blacks have by letting them become like whites. Therefore, Kennedy can maintain a defense of democracy and American society while simultaneously helping blacks to reach equality. The attorney general erases the lines of difference between the two groups and understands blacks as white people who have not realized their full potential. This stance works to firmly establish whiteness as the universal norm not only in American society but also in the world, since the black culture that whiteness erases has its roots in Africa. In adopting a plan of action that promises each race “equal opportunity” (Guthman and Allen 88), one must ask, equal opportunity to what? In this case the answer betrays itself: equal opportunity

to become white. In an address to the National Insurance Association, the attorney general proudly proclaims, “Today an America of equal opportunity for all its citizens is just around the corner and we have no time to lose” (Guthman and Allen 88). However, this kind of equal opportunity comes with a high price. Kennedy’s plan does not celebrate or even allow black culture and its differences from other cultures. Rather, it allows equal opportunity based up on the condition that blacks will buy into and adopt normative white ideologies.

For Robert Kennedy, the fact that the opportunity for freedom includes acquiescing to whiteness seems to go unnoticed. Kennedy’s notion of what constitutes success, equality, and normalcy is so invested in whiteness that he does not truly recognize black culture, or any other culture, and its benefits. In the attorney general’s mind, black people should jump at the chance to live a successful, “normal” lifestyle, and the fact that such a lifestyle means a white lifestyle is lost on Kennedy, as is the case with many whites. This failure to recognize a culture other than one’s own demonstrates the notion of ethnocentrism. According to Todorov, ethnocentrism occurs when one denies “the existence of a human substance truly other” (*Conquest* 42), and Kennedy does just this when he attempts to appropriate black culture into mainstream white culture. For the attorney general, white American dictates normalcy, and all other lifestyles constitute slight deviations or perversions of that lifestyle. Other cultures are not inherently different, but they are simply versions of white American that have not been fully realized.

Kennedy's negotiation of his relationship with black Americans becomes more complicated when viewed through lens of politics. When dealing with politicians one must always take care to examine closely different types of rhetoric in order to uncover true motives. The attorney general seems to have taken a genuine interest in helping to gain Civil Rights for blacks; however, clearly the election of his brother to the presidency played a key role in every public move the Robert Kennedy made. In regards to the Kennedys' relationship to blacks in the 1960's Robert claims that they "had some problem with the Negroes at that time because they didn't associate President Kennedy with the cause of the Negroes, particularly" (Guthman and Shulman 68). The attorney general's expression of having a problem with Negroes suggests that he felt the administration should take some action to alleviate the problem. In other words, the Kennedys wanted the Negroes on their side. This political strategy does not undercut all of Robert Kennedy's work for Civil Rights, nor does it suppose that political rather than moral imperatives drove most of his actions involving the issue, for Kennedy stood to lose much politically from the Civil Rights campaign and legislation. Rather, the attorney general sought to bring blacks into his way of thinking politically to benefit both them and himself or his administration. This strategy supports the notion of ethnocentrism discussed earlier in regards to Kennedy. His main strategy in alleviating both the problems the blacks experience themselves and the ones that they present to white people revolves around political homogenization. Kennedy does not see the possibilities in a stratified public, but his solution for correcting mistakes is to make sure that everyone shares one ideology. The fact that ideology reflects only the dominant

white worldview does not concern or confront Kennedy. His ideology establishes universal criteria for proper social constructs because it holds the most power, and most power equals best. Therefore, he does not even have to consider that others may offer or hold a different perception of the world than he does because those other perceptions have no power over him. If everyone simply does “the sensible thing” then, yes, Mississippi and Alabama will work themselves out.

The problem with Kennedy’s thinking here concerns the fact that for blacks to adopt dominant ideology they must believe in their own inferiority. In order for black people to give up their own worldview in order to assimilate to white America, they must first acknowledge the white American perception as in some way superior to their own. Most scholars accept the fact that humans differ along different cognitive lines, and according to Todorov, recognizing that difference is key in ethically understanding the other (*Conquest* 42). However, the question of whether one can fully step outside of his original cognitive framework remains. Kennedy’s ultimate goal to assimilate blacks into mainstream white culture may not even be possible. However, Kennedy does not take this paradox into account because he seems to ignore the fact that the other is different and may understand the world differently. For the attorney general to truly believe that a marginalized people can suddenly adopt a mainstream worldview, he must understand the minority perception not as totally different but, rather, not fully formed. He wishes to enlighten the other by helping them experience the “right” way to live. By understanding the black culture as a sort of incomplete version of white culture,

Kennedy projects the image of himself onto the other, and in so doing, Kennedy may actually say more about the way he views himself than the way he views alterity.

One must always have an other in order to define the self. Additionally, the perception that one has of the other speaks less about the true nature of that other than it does the self. As Edward Said notes in *Orientalism*, most Western writings about the Orient say little about that place. Instead, most Orientalist writings betray a projection that Westerners wish upon the Orient (Said 6). In this way, the West defines itself over and against the crude and primitive Orient. The relationship between the two places has little to do with reality, but it works as a system which perpetuates the dominance of the West over the East. Race in America has worked much the same way. White definitions of blacks have little to do with actual black culture. Indeed, the extreme segregation of the south shows little interaction between the two cultures. In Birmingham, Alabama officials such as Bull Connor made sure to enforce strict zoning laws which kept the races totally segregated, even within the private sphere (“Birmingham”). One example of the way in which white culture projected itself onto black culture in order to differentiate and dominate comes from different understandings of masculinity during the Cold War Era. During this time, white masculinity had become very domesticated (Corber 34). Society expected responsible men to spend more time in the home and have a larger part in raising the family (Corber 35). White men used descriptions of black males as dangerous, hypersexual, and sexual outlaws in order to maintain white masculinity as “normal,” universal, and, therefore, dominant (Corber 50). Because white masculinity had become domestic rather than aggressive,

white males had lost a certain part of their identity. During this time white men found self-definition not in their domineering roles as competitors and competent workers; rather, society began to define a man's character by his ability to act as a good husband and father. In order to both retain the aggressive aspect of masculinity and to maintain the distance between themselves and blacks, white males defined black males as overly assertive and sexually deviant. In this way, white masculinity differentiated itself from black masculinity by projecting a part of its own self image onto the other.

Kennedy's rhetoric has an element of self-projection that also seems to subordinate black culture. Although he attempts to win Civil Rights for blacks, his suggestion that blacks assimilate to mainstream white society shows that Kennedy does not understand blacks as different. Rather, he sees them as incomplete white people, much like children. Although Kennedy's rhetoric does not attempt to subordinate blacks in the way that the notion of black masculinity did during the Cold War, his words do universalize whiteness. Kennedy claims that for blacks, "We have unveiled the prospect of full participation in American society, while television, radio, and newspapers bring to every Negro home the knowledge of how rewarding such participation can be" (Kennedy 123). American society is white. Here, Kennedy calls blacks to participate in white society. He acknowledges that blacks reside on the outside of mainstream American society. If blacks are on the outside, then whites must constitute the inside. Kennedy has all but stated that America is a white society, and he and other benevolent white people have attempted to invite blacks into white society. Civil Rights will come with a cost. In order to enjoy the freedom that Kennedy offers, blacks must become

white. In this way, Kennedy's rhetoric unconsciously perpetuates white dominance. Blacks can never fully become white because, simply, they do not have white skin. Hence, even if blacks do gain Civil Rights, a distinction will remain. Black people can only imitate whiteness; they can never fully achieve it. Not only can black people not change the color of their skin, but they can do little to change the ways in which others react to that skin. In other words, they cannot become white physically or culturally. Culture does not evolve from skin color, but, as I will later discuss, the reactions of society to skin color eventually create racial cultures. By inviting blacks into a culture to which they do not belong, Kennedy's rhetoric reinforces a pre-existing hierarchy and continues to use self-projection to maintain whiteness as universal.

Although Kennedy does deserve praise for his effort to ensure equal rights for all Americans, his perception of the other is not fully ethical in Todorov's terms because he denies the difference of the black race. Because his self-projection defines the other in terms of self, Kennedy does not see the blacks as equal and different. He denies the difference of blacks altogether. This notion may seem paradoxical because of the way that Kennedy's rhetoric establishes a universal whiteness. However, by universalizing whiteness, the attorney general defines a standard that black people can at least work toward. Although blacks can only achieve an imitation of the standard, the standard still defines their acceptability. The possibility of an entirely different culture with a separate cognitive system does not fit into this model. The fact that black people may not wish to conform to white ideals does not make sense in a world where white is not a separate race, but *the* race and the norm.

This seemingly inadvertent absorption of black culture caused some blacks, such as Malcolm X, to call for separation rather than integration. At one stage in his life, Malcolm X recognized that the imitation of white culture by black people destroyed the latter's culture, and rather than integrating with whites, he wanted black people to begin to develop their own self-sufficient society in which blacks would support all black businesses. This model, he said, did not involve segregation but separation (251). One particular example of blacks imitating white culture that Malcolm disdained entailed a black male hairstyle called a "conk." Many young black men in the 1960's conked their hair, which meant placing lye in the hair in order to straighten it. When a young man had conked his hair, it laid very straight and shiny, just like a white man's hair. According to Malcolm, having this type of hair style worked as a sort of status symbol: whoever had the best conk looked the most white, and therefore had the most social capital.

For Malcolm X, this hairstyle represented the lengths that black people would go to fit into white society. The lye that a man had to put in his hair in order to conk it burned his scalp terribly, and could cause lasting physical damage if left in too long (X 56). That blacks would practically disfigure themselves in order to attain some semblance of whiteness upset Malcolm X. He understood that blacks could never become white; they could only attain a near, often painful, imitation (56-7). The black leader believed that this effort to imitate white culture drastically devalued blacks and their native culture, and he spoke from experience. In his early life, Malcolm lived as a street hustler always on the move but based in Harlem. In those days, the young man

conked his hair, dated white women, and bought into other white status symbols. Speaking of the first time that he attempted to emulate the hairstyle of the whites, Malcolm X claims, “this was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined the multitude of brainwashed Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are ‘inferior’ – and white people ‘superior’ – that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look “pretty” by white standards” (56-7). When understood in these terms, black assimilation to whiteness clearly degrades the former.

As Malcolm X states, universalizing whiteness and inviting blacks into mainstream society presupposes that black people believe in their own inferiority. Robert Kennedy does not explicitly or intentionally state this fact. Indeed, because of his ethnocentrism, Kennedy does not truly recognize black culture as different. However, Kennedy’s other does not have the luxury of denying that blackness is inherent in African American personhood. Kennedy can offer whiteness to non-whites without enforcing a hierarchical standard, but non-whites cannot accept that offer in the same manner. Blacks could not simply overlook the differences between the races. Certainly, hundreds of years of racism had worked to remind them daily of those differences. Because of this recognition, the accepting of whiteness would mean a blatant forsaking and devaluation of black people’s own culture. Kennedy, therefore, inadvertently asks blacks to admit their own “inferiority” in order to gain the “full participation in American society” that he offers.

In all probability, Kennedy did not realize what he implicitly required of African Americans. He truly hoped and believed that his actions might work for the betterment of blacks in America: "The United States is dominated by white people, politically and economically. The question is whether we, in this position of dominance, are going to have not the charity, but the wisdom to stop penalizing our fellow citizens whose only fault or sin is that they were born" (Guthman and Allen 100). Here Kennedy entwines morality with wisdom. He wants to help blacks not just by giving them handouts. He does not feel sorry for them. Rather, he seems to claim that it only makes sense that all citizens share equal rights for the good of the nation. White Americans must stop condemning the "sin" of having black skin. Both true wisdom and correct morals would dictate the end of racial prejudice. Indeed, "all thinking Americans have grown increasingly aware that discrimination must stop – not only because it is legally unsupportable, economically wasteful, and socially destructive, but above all because it is morally wrong" (Guthman and Allen 100).

Through his appeal to reason and morality, Kennedy again shows that his primary interest lies in American democracy. Without the end of discrimination, the American way of life loses some of its credibility. As the attorney general claims, "we are not going to be able to convince people in other lands that we mean what we say in the Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution if a large number of our citizens are denied their full rights" (Guthman and Allen 87). Although Kennedy's aim with these words lies in convincing other Americans of the necessity of Civil Rights, his

entreaty still belies his mindset. Blacks do not necessarily deserve their full rights simply because they are humans but because they are Americans.

Kennedy's moral imperative seems to revolve less around the need to "treat thy neighbor as thyself" and more around the need to uphold and strengthen the American way of life. Kennedy's strong belief in the democratic system influences his speech and actions. The "deep interest and affection" that the attorney general feels toward the United States in some ways blind him toward the effects of his statements. As Kennedy has already recognized, America is white. However, he does not realize that his love of his country therefore correlates with a love of whiteness. In the end, he believes only strong democracy can preserve America and save the world, and if racism undercuts the authority of the Declaration of Independence, then Americans have a moral responsibility to expel racism and strengthen the United States. For only then can the world begin to realize human rights because continued refinement of liberty in the United States "will light our country and all who serve it – and the glow from that fire can truly light the world" (Gottheimer 290). However, not all of the people fighting for Civil Rights agreed with Kennedy's emphasis on preserving white America's way of life.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL

Stokely Carmichael acted as the figurehead of a philosophy called “Black Power.” When Black Power first emerged as an ideology, it sought to define the terms of the other in reference to the movement. Previously, nonviolent protestors had termed the other as anyone not interested in or willing to defend justice. Therefore, if white people would lend a hand to the cause, then they became a part of the movement. As time went on, some people began to question the role of whites in the movement. Carmichael and his followers insisted that whites in general should not participate in the movement. Blacks did not have the time or patience to seek out well-meaning whites because they had dealt with so many oppressive and insincere whites. Cleveland Sellers speaks for Stokely and the Black Power movement when he states, “It was obvious that [whites] did not and probably could not possess Black Consciousness” (Sellers and Terrell 157).

Although Stokely Carmichael pushed the slogan of Black Power during the late 1960’s, his first involvement with the movement included nonviolent protests. Carmichael first learned of nonviolence at Howard University, and eventually entered the Civil Rights movement on its most heated front, the South: “I simply could not wait for my own baptism by fire. The discussions, and the planning and training sessions, were interesting, but they only served to whet my impatience for action. Would I, could I, maintain nonviolence in the face of attack?” (*Ready* 155). Carmichael’s beginnings as a nonviolent protestor seem especially interesting when compared to his later rhetoric of

Black Power. For Carmichael, Black Power meant just that: a movement for blacks, by blacks. No room existed in Carmichael's philosophy for white members, and he made this clear in his rhetoric. According to Cleveland Sellers, when discussing the extension of James Meredith's march, Stokely argued that the movement should "deemphasize white participation, [and] that it should be used to highlight the need for independent, black political units" (162). Carmichael explicitly articulated these ideas later in the march after getting out of jail in Greenwood, Mississippi. Sellers quotes him as saying, "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" (166).

The use of the slogan "Black Power" in the march through Mississippi had some complicated repercussions for Stokely and his followers because "one major problem was that SNCC [or Carmichael] failed to define the term clearly" (Carmichael and Thelwell 524). Recently, in Stokely Carmichael's (now called Kwame Ture) autobiography, *Ready for Revolution*, Carmichael discusses the ambiguity of the term "Black Power": "The conjunction of these individually harmless and inoffensive words became shocking... Apparently incomprehensible in combination, the phrase became a source of confusion to otherwise intelligent and sophisticated Americans. A concept, so it appeared, entirely beyond the cognitive reach of the white national media and public" (524). Because Stokely, and the others who coined the term, never strictly defined it, many people, both white and black, began to assign their own definitions to the term. Eventually, Carmichael attempted to assign an explicit definition to the term, but by this

time it was too late. The term had begun to take on a certain definition, and the popular conception of the term involved an aspect of racism. Even the NAACP denounced the term, when Roy Wilkins, the NAACP secretary, “called [Stokely and his followers] racists. Black Power, he said, meant antiwhite power. It meant black separation...It meant ‘the ranging of race against race’ on the irrelevant basis of skin color” (Carmichael and Thelwell 525). So whatever Stokely Carmichael originally meant by the term, the American public took offense and felt threatened.

Although the ambiguity involved in understanding just what “Black Power” meant makes assessing its philosophical implications difficult, through close examination of Carmichael’s rhetoric, one can discover some basic principles that Stokely based his beliefs upon and can observe how the slogan worked in the public sphere despite its intended meaning. As stated earlier, the public conception of the Black Power philosophy included racism and separation, and Carmichael explicitly states that the fear and attacks that the term earned “were not really about anything we’d actually said. They were about the *implications* of what we’d said. What Black Power might and could mean. And, of course, what they *thought* it might mean or do. Clearly the combination of these two words had struck a nerve” (*Ready* 527). Carmichael thought that other black leaders, the white media, and the American public in general had misunderstood his intentions in using the words “Black Power.” However, no matter what Carmichael truly intended, he inadvertently became the figurehead for a new, more militant, branch of the Civil Rights campaign. Once the threat of Black Power had “struck a nerve,” people did not forget or redefine the philosophy, and much

of the importance of Black Power came from what Stokely's newfound followers thought it meant. So although in some ways Carmichael might not have adhered to the popular conception of the slogan's meaning of strict black separatism, he still, albeit sometimes unwillingly, represented the notion of Black Power and what that philosophy taught about encountering the Other.

Furthermore, although Stokely Carmichael later claimed that the public had misinterpreted the meaning of Black Power, his new definition does partly align with the popular conception of the motto. According to Stokely, the issues involved in defining the term included both political and cultural issues. In the political arena, the term revolved around a movement "to consciously begin to organize among ourselves [black people] and find the power to affirm and control our legitimate political rights and our full human dignity. Self-determination. No longer pretending to accept, with a grin and a shuffle, whatever grudging crumbs and concessions the white establishment might feel disposed to toss our way... To *assert* and *demand* everything that is ours by right, nothing less" (Carmichael and Thelwell 527). So Black Power did still involve a struggle of blacks to wrest political rights and power from the whites who held it. Also, Carmichael's explanation of this philosophy involved self-definition. Blacks no longer wanted whites to define them or their role within American society. This aspect of the movement, although right and fair in its aim for black people, did threaten white power. Although the term might not have included the degree of militancy that some thought, the taking of power from a group that has it is always threatening and revolutionary. The nonviolence that had characterized the movement up to the Mississippi march,

although not totally passive in its approach, did not “assert” or “demand” the rights of black people in such a powerful way. In contrast to nonviolence Black Power was threatening.

The other aspect of Carmichael’s Black Power included culture: “But, of course, you can’t divorce politics from culture. The underlying and fundamental notion was that black folks needed to begin openly, and had the right and the duty, to define for ourselves, *in our own terms*, our real circumstances, possibilities, and interests relative to white America. . . To consciously and publicly free ourselves from the heritage of demeaning definitions and limitations imposed on us, over centuries of colonial conditioning by a racist culture” (*Ready* 525). Again Carmichael focuses on self-definition, one in which “self” included only those people with black skin, to form a collective “black consciousness,” in which white people could not participate. Although Stokely claimed that Black Power did not include separatism or racism, it, by nature, had to. Black Power and “black consciousness” sought a self-definition for black people. For too long white society had dictated the role of blacks within American communities, and for black people to make any gains, they needed to determine their own identity, separate from white intervention. Black Power did not simply revolve around gaining rights for black people but having black people come to terms with themselves and their worth as a people. To accomplish this goal, no white people could have involvement in the development of Black Power. This movement had to be a movement for blacks, by blacks, and black America had to reach self-actualization

before integration could mean anything. Because of these requirements, Black Power had certain implications for how its adherents encountered alterity.

Carmichael's Black Power philosophy dictated how he defined and interacted with the Other. In his mind the movement clearly entailed a struggle of blacks against whites. Stokely drew lines of alterity strictly along racial boundaries. His goal did not include creating a fully integrated and accepting society; he wanted power for his people – Black Power (Sellers and Terrell 166). Carmichael understood race as the primary factor in determining human diversity, especially within America, and he based his actions on those beliefs. In this way, Carmichael did fully understand that the Other differed from him, but in his mind the Other did not have equality. Although generally the more powerful group within any certain cultural interaction will have the inclination to fail to see the Other as equal, in this case, Stokely and his followers, people within the disenfranchised portion of society, saw themselves as superior: "In the end, we cannot and shall not offer any guarantees that Black Power, if achieved, would be non-racist. . . . The final truth is that the white society is not entitled to reassurances, even if it were possible to offer them" (*Black Power* 49). Carmichael states that racism towards whites is not the explicit goal of Black Power, but it may very well constitute an inevitable side effect. Understandably, Stokely Carmichael prioritizes the self-definition of his own people above the needs of the other. In so doing, he implicitly states a belief in the basic superiority of the black race. This reaction seems especially interesting coming from a long subordinated group.

One advantage of studying human diversity within the American Civil Rights movement is that scholars have access to the disenfranchised voice. Often the thoughts and opinions only of the people in power avail themselves to study. For instance, in Todorov's study of the American conquest, the thoughts and feeling of the Amerindians do not fully emerge. An important aspect of Todorov's subject lies in the fact that although scholars have access to many New World writings, very few of those writings represent a purely Indian point of view: "The absence of writing is an important element of the situation, perhaps even *the* most important." (80). The Indians used primitive writing systems, and conquerors destroyed a large portion of their written works. For instance, Diego de Landa, a Franciscan monk, instigated "several public autos-da-fé in which all the Mayan books in existence at the time [were] burned" (200). The Indians' lack of technology, especially in the area of semiotics such as writing, contributed to the confusion between themselves and the Spaniards, and since scholars have access to very few primary texts written by the Indians, the task of discerning exactly how the Indians interpreted the actions of the Spaniards proves difficult. In contrast, people representing both sides of the Civil Rights movement wrote and spoke extensively, and they shared types of language and technology. Even though the people largely shared semiotic techniques, members of both groups perceived each other differently and often incorrectly. Therefore, the Indians' lack of writing technology that "is revelatory...of the capacity to perceive the other" (Todorov *Conquest* 80) does not play a part in the misunderstandings that took place during the Civil Rights movement. Rather, some other explanation must account for the misperceptions and differences in understanding

that emerged between different people in the Civil Rights movement, and that solution may come through studying the rhetoric of both white and black leaders.

One black leader who had well documented experiences and opinions was Malcolm X. Like Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X at one time believed that whites did not have a place in the struggle for black equality. Although Malcolm did not associate himself directly with the Black Power movement, his definition of alterity aligned with the views of Stokely and his followers. As a member of the Nation of Islam, also called the Black Muslims, Malcolm X traveled around the country preaching that white people literally were devils. According to the philosophy that Malcolm learned from Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, “the first humans, Original Man, were a black people” (X 168). During the early times in the history of humanity, about seventy percent of the people on earth “were satisfied, and thirty per cent were dissatisfied, among the dissatisfied was born a ‘Mr. Yacub’ ... Though he was a black man, Mr. Yacub, embittered toward Allah now, decided, as revenge, to create upon the earth a devil race – a bleached-out, white race of people” (X 169). Before his conversion to the type of Islam practiced in the east, Malcolm believed and taught this view of white people to which the Black Muslims adhered. Once one understands that Malcolm followed these types of doctrines, then the observer can clearly see that the black leader thought that race played an integral role in human diversity. Whites and blacks did not simply represent different cultures, or different views of society. Rather, blacks roots went back to Original Man while white heritage evolved from a race of devils. These two groups did not simply differ in psychical characteristics or cultural norms. The very

reason for the existence of the white race involved suppression and irritation of the black race. The black race represented civilized minds, and peaceful existence while “the white devil race in Europe’s caves was savage... He climbed trees outside his cave, made clubs, trying to protect his family from the wild beasts outside trying to get in” (X 170).

The views shared by Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael both invert the racist understanding of race. In his book entitled *On Human Diversity*, Todorov addresses the concept of racialism starting with the writings of Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, an eighteenth century scientist and philosopher. According to Todorov, racialists believe not only that specific differences exist between races but also that some races are superior to others (*Diversity* 93). The classic racist argument defends the position that people with lighter skin comprise the superior group of humans, while those with darker skin are inferior. This belief clearly impacted American history and undoubtedly worked as a justification for slavery and the denial of Civil Rights after the abolition of slavery. Interestingly, the tenets of Carmichael’s Black Power movement, and those of Malcolm X’s early philosophy, embraced the racist notions that whites had used to oppress blacks for many years. The two men might have reversed the roles, but the basic racist beliefs defined their ideas.

As Carmichael led the new, more militant SNCC into an era of Black Power, his rhetoric began to reflect the fact that he saw whites as morally inferior to himself and his black brothers and sisters. Sellers states, “we believed we were morally superior to those allied against us” (146), and Stokely’s speeches and writings reflect this sentiment. For instance, when Stokely Carmichael writes about white power, he describes the way that

whites have abused their position of authority, and portrays blacks as morally superior to whites. He asserts that most white people do not even want to hear his statements about equality and that “the whole question of race is one that America would much rather not face honestly and squarely” (*Black Power* viii). Carmichael’s reasons for perceiving himself and other blacks as morally superior to whites could stem from any number of wrongdoings perpetrated by whites against blacks, but whatever his specific reasons for identifying the two groups in this manner, his definitions of himself and the other are linked, and those definitions effect the way he chooses to react to the other.

By applying Todorov’s notion of ethically encountering the other, one sees that Carmichael fails by not seeing the other as equal. He has clearly defined those he identifies as the other, and he recognizes a clear difference between himself and that other. As discussed earlier, Carmichael chose to define alterity solely along racial lines, and most people easily recognized the physical and cultural differences between white people and black people in America in the 1960’s. However, by asserting a type of superiority over white people, he has adopted a hierarchical system – one which subordinates white people to black people. In fact, he uses the same system that he claimed to fight against. By invoking a hierarchy, which bases superiority upon race alone, he essentially adopts a racialist point of view. One may find it difficult to blame Carmichael for attempting to reverse the racism that he had experienced his entire life, but rather than apply the blame to him, I simply want to examine why he viewed human diversity in the ways in which he did. Stokely Carmichael worked within the hierarchical frame in which he had experience, where one race always acted as if it held

innate superiority over another. The fact that his rhetorical stance exchanges which group stands at the top of the hierarchy and which group stands at the bottom does not mean he has eliminated the system of superiority and inferiority; he has simply reversed it. To transcend the mental framework in which Carmichael grew up presents a difficult task. Because American society constantly sent messages that whites held superiority over blacks, it seems that the natural reaction for Stokely would involve a justification for black superiority rather than simply black equality.

That Carmichael relies solely upon race to determine alterity invites several interesting questions, especially when one compares Carmichael's and Eugene "Bull" Connor's approaches to the Other. Advocates of Black Power and its different articulations believed that blacks should seek concessions from whites "by any means necessary" – a slogan that insinuates the use of violence. Similarly, Bull Connor understood human diversity to breakdown along racial lines, and his main tactic in interacting with the other involved extreme violence. These two men, Stokely and Bull, perceived and encountered the Other in similar ways. This comparison seems surprising considering the differences between the two men. Besides the obvious difference that the men were of different races, the two men had totally different relationships with those in power. As a part of the marginalized portion of American society, Stokely had little or no legitimate power within society. In contrast, Connor acted as the public safety commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama. However, beside these psychological and otherwise superficial differences, the two men largely shared mental processes. For both men, the definition of the Other involved the separation of the races. Little room existed

in each man's philosophy for possible acceptance of the other race, they literally saw the issue as black and white. So although each man defined the other man as different, in actuality the two had much in common. According to their beliefs, Stokely and Bull represented extreme opposites and exhibited different values. However, because of those very beliefs, the two men acted and thought very similarly. Therefore, although Bull Connor and Stokely Carmichael seem to portray opposite ends of value spectrum, the two men actually work within very similar mental systems. Interestingly, this very fact seems to breakdown the lines of human diversity that the two men chose to draw and to question race as a marker of human diversity. If race truly defined humans as different from one another, then one would expect for people of different races to act and think differently and to value different things. However, the opposite occurs in the case of Bull Connor and Stokely Carmichael. By studying the rhetoric of each man, one can see that the major difference in their worldviews involves simply switching the role of blacks and whites.

That both men couple a rigid definition of alterity with an acceptance of violence toward the Other may help to enlighten scholars as to the reasons behind each man's actions. Both Bull Connor and Stokely Carmichael understood their race as superior in some way to the other race, and since race represented an easily defined and readily apparent difference, ambiguity never threatened the question of the Other. Relying on such strongly defined beliefs, the men could then act with much conviction. Furthermore, because of such deep faith in the superiority of their own group, the men could use their intense beliefs to dehumanize the Other. For Stokely, white people did

not represent fully functioning moral humans. Rather, in whites he saw a morally debased and ethically bankrupt race (*Black Power* 5). Adhering to a similar viewpoint, Malcolm X explicitly stated in the early stages of his conversion to the Nation of Islam that “the first humans. . . were black” (168). An evil man, Mr. Yacub, bred white people into existence:

From his studies, the big-head scientist knew that black men contained two germs, black and brown...Mr. Yacub, to upset the law of nature, conceived the idea of employing what we today know as the recessive genes structure, to separate from each other the two germs, black and brown, and then grafting the brown germ to progressively lighter, weaker stages. The humans resulting, he knew, would be, as they became lighter, and weaker, progressively also more susceptible to wickedness and evil. And in this way he would achieve the intended bleached-out white race of devils. (168)

As Malcolm X states, members of the white race were human, but barely. In fact, these so-called humans exhibited very weak human traits and showed much more susceptibility to evil. Therefore, although the one might use the term human to refer to them, they still represented something slightly less than human, something devilish. Similarly, Bull Connor’s actions toward black protestors in Birmingham suggest that he did not respect them as humans. In order to brutally attack them with fire hoses, he had to deny their humanity in some sense. A person who respected others as fully human could not attack those people in such a heinous way. Thus, this rigid and uncompromising definition of alterity along racial lines may increase the probability of a person using violence toward the inferior, dehumanized Other.

By dehumanizing the Other, one can deny that that other presents a viable alternative to one’s own culture, thus, failing to perceive the existence of alterity. This

failure, often labeled ethnocentrism, played a part in the struggle for Civil Rights. Carmichael's rhetoric interacts with ethnocentrism in an intriguing way. By sending out a call to blacks to look beyond the normal American worldview, he attempts to fight against ethnocentrism. Carmichael understands that white America has imposed an identity on the black community based upon the white value system. Because whites had always controlled means of communication, blacks had no other way of understanding themselves except by the dominant value system that whites forced upon them. Furthermore, Stokely understands what Robert Kennedy does not, that assimilating into white culture means the end of black culture: "The American 'melting pot' meant us – as a people assimilating, despite racist resistance, the culture and values of the mainstream, hoping to pass over into and be "accepted" by the community *on their terms*. To blend in, call no attention to differences – in effect, to sneak into white acceptance. Clearly a form of cultural suicide" (*Ready* 531). Stokely Carmichael hears Kennedy's offer of "the prospect of full participation in American society" (123), yet he realizes that the messages that "television, radio, and newspapers bring to every Negro home [regarding] the knowledge of how rewarding such participation can be" (Kennedy 123) threaten to put an end to a distinct black culture. Carmichael recognizes the ethnocentrism inherent in such a statement. He fully understands the implications of integration through assimilation – implications to which Robert Kennedy seems completely blind. Kennedy, and others who fought to integrate blacks into white society, truly wanted equal rights for black people. Unfortunately, these white leaders did not realize that in asking blacks to assimilate, they asked them to regard as inferior,

and to forsake, their own culture. Stokely Carmichael and many black people did realize that integration into the American mainstream, “self-consciously defined as culturally ‘white’ and Eurocentric” (*Ready* 531) necessarily meant “abandoning our culture and rich heritage” (*Ready* 531). However, the very ethnocentrism that Stokely decries in white America often surfaces in his own rhetoric.

Carmichael asks his followers to step outside of themselves and to recognize a new value system. The framework of Black Power sees the struggles of black America as part of the worldwide struggle of black people against imperialism: “Black Power means that black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the ‘Third World’ ... Black people in this country then have the responsibility to oppose, at least to neutralize, that [imperialistic] effort by white America.” (Carmichael and Hamilton, vi). However, this “new” value system has a very familiar aspect. Carmichael insists on the moral superiority of the black race. As mentioned above, Cleveland Sellers makes this belief explicit in speaking on behalf of the Black Power movement, “we believed we were morally superior to those allied against us” (146). In this way, those fighting for Black Power simply reiterate the belief that one group must hold superiority over the other. Again, the actual value system remains the same as in mainstream American society, only a movement within the established framework occurs. Therefore, Carmichael engages the same ethnocentrism that he attempts to combat. As Stokely explicitly states in his autobiography, “[Black Power] was patently not about either hating or loving white people. That quite simply was not the issue. That it really had nothing to do with them was something they could not seem to grasp.

Being pro-black didn't mean you're antiwhite" (*Ready* 531-2). Here, Carmichael again highlights the ethnocentrism of whites as he sees it. According to Stokely, whites simply could not imagine an issue that did not revolve around them. However, this young leader and his followers did attempt to define black culture in distinction from white culture. The claim that white culture or white people had absolutely nothing to do with the Black Power movement clearly proves false. Racial relations in the United States created the context for Civil Rights and consequently Black Power. If the issue truly "had nothing to do with them," then no reason for a movement would have existed. However, the notion that Black Power "was...not about hating or loving white people" does have some complicated implications. Carmichael explicitly states that the Black Power movement centered on introspection – focusing on improving the lot of blacks by building black pride. Such black pride did not necessarily entail the inferiority of another race or culture, but for blacks to gain power, they had to take it from someone who already had it. This attitude makes Black Power ethnocentric in two ways. First, the movement fails to recognize that it must define itself against the Other. Rather than totally failing to recognize alterity at all, Black Power attempts to ignore it. Secondly, the philosophy works within the same framework as mainstream America – a hierarchical framework. So although Carmichael attempts to avert ethnocentrism by situating the movement within the context of worldwide imperialism over blacks, he still uses the dominant American value system by asserting the moral superiority of one group over another. America has taught Carmichael that one group must always hold

superiority over another, and, in some aspects, he cannot escape the value system that he has always known.

THEOPHILUS EUGENE "BULL" CONNOR

If Robert Kennedy acted on behalf of the Civil Rights movement more than almost any other white man within the so-called "establishment," then Eugene "Bull" Connor may have acted the most hostile toward the protestors. As the Commissioner of Public Safety, and later Police Commissioner, in Birmingham, Alabama in the mid-1960's, Connor's regular constituency consisted mainly of people who had always known, and took for granted, racism and segregation. Because only whites voted, they comprised the portion of society that he had to please in order to remain in power. So not only did Connor himself have deep running racist tendencies, the people he served in office did as well. Connor's racist attitude evidenced itself constantly in his policies and actions as a public officer. In 1963 Connor called for a boycott of the integrationists in Birmingham: "You're not going to win this thing with knives, rocks, shotguns, or dynamite... You've got to whip them with selective buying, or maybe you call it a boycott" ("Connor"). Connor's attitude toward the other appears plain. He explains the relationship between the two groups as a contest in which only one group will prevail. For Connor, a clear winner, and a clear loser, must eventually emerge.

If Connor understood the climate of 1960's America to produce a competition, then black people and white people comprised the teams in the contest. Bull Connor drew the lines of alterity or human division strictly along lines of race. "Negroes" did not belong in white society, especially as full citizens with complete rights. Therefore, as long as Bull Connor remained in power the segregation laws in Birmingham stayed in

tact ("Birmingham"). These laws stated "that whites and Negroes must be separated by a physical barrier at all public meetings" (Birmingham). In Connor's mind, no questions existed about the other, whom he strictly defined as any person of the black race. Like many Americans, Connor had learned that white people and black people differed in fundamental ways. For him, normal, white society did exist and should exist separately from "negro" society.

Connor's strictly racial definition of alterity also determined how he interacted with that other. Again considering that Connor explained the struggle over equality in terms of a contest between black people and white people, the observer can see that the Police Commissioner thought that one race must prove its superiority over the other. In Todorov's terms, the two groups could never be equal but would always be different. Connor's belief that the two races should always remain segregated shows that he clearly saw black people as different from himself. If white people and black people did not differ from each other, then no reason for segregation would have existed. Connor fulfills the criteria that a person should see the Other as different, but the criteria of equality seems to escape him. The very nature of competition provides for one group to prove its superiority over all the others. If Connor and the others who thought like him wanted "to win this thing," they had to not only assert but prove their superiority over the so-called "Negroes." For Connor, the notion of equality seems not to have even existed. If black people gained the rights that they sought, then they did not only receive equality, but superiority. Connor adhered so much to a hierarchical view of society that two races occupying the same social position did not make sense to him. White people

could either fight to keep their power or lose it altogether by admitting defeat to those who challenged them.

Connor's attitude most clearly resembles the classic racist argument outlined above. Not only did the races differ, but one race, the white race, held a sort of dominance over other races, which resulted from the belief of many whites in their own innate superiority. He completely refused to see the other as equal. Black people and white people differed inherently, and the Birmingham Police Commissioner thought it should stay that way. Connor not only believed that the situation should remain static, he believed that the races did not have the ability to bridge their differences. It was not that equality simply should not happen. Rather, it could not happen. And if the races never would achieve equality, then Connor sought to make sure that the white race remained in power. One way that he attempted to keep control over the black population in Birmingham involved backing zoning laws that prevented black people from living in white neighborhoods and white people from living in black neighborhoods: "'Pass this law and this first one who moves in, white or Negro, I guarantee you Connor's men will put in the jug,' said Mr. Connor in arguing for the ordinance before the city commission" ("Birmingham"). In seeking to keep the races separate, Connor threatened to go as far as punishing white people who served as a detriment to the cause of segregation. Also, the laws that the Police Commissioner sought to enact did more than simply keep the races separate. According to the *New York Times*, at the time that the Bull Connor endorsed the laws "Negroes comprise[d] 43 percent of Birmingham's population. The zoning law [gave] them 16 per cent of the city's 52-square-mile living area" ("Birmingham") Mr.

Connor sought to confine the black population that made up almost half of the city of Birmingham into less than one fifth of the city's living space. The makers of these laws had obvious plans to separate and control the black population by crowding them into such a small living area while maintaining high market value in white housing areas ("Birmingham").

Bull Connor often used his rhetoric to perpetuate the suppression of blacks and to blame them for the very crimes committed against them. For instance, in August of 1949, bombs exploded near the homes of two black ministers living in an area zoned only for white people ("Two"). A newspaper reported Bull Connor's reaction to the crimes when he stated that Negroes "are partly to blame for the incident for not informing the police... They [the Negroes] had a tip from a Negro that something was going to happen last night. Instead of calling the police, they called in their neighbors. I understand they had shotguns and were waiting for them when the dynamiters came" ("Two"). Connor explicitly lays part of the blame for the bombing upon the victims of the crime. This strategy, well known to people in power, of blaming an oppressed or marginalized people for the crimes against them parallels the situation that Todorov reports in *The Conquest of America*. In that book, the Spaniards who come to explore the New World often perpetrate terrible crimes against the Amerindians they encounter. The conquistadores, such as Herndando de Cortez, rationalize their actions by claiming that the pagan Indians deserve such treatment. The conquerors even go so far as to read a prepared document, called the *Requerimiento*, to each tribe before plundering their village (Todorov *Conquest* 147). The document claims that if the Indians will forsake

their pagan ways and declare loyalty to the Spanish King, the Europeans will not destroy them. However, the Spaniards read the document in Spanish, a language that the Indians do not understand, and often out of ear shot of the New World inhabitants. However, the conquerors do not allow these disadvantages to curb their wrath, and they proceed to punish the Amerindians who, to the European minds, should know to repent of their evil ways. Therefore, the Spaniards blame the Indians for their own demise even against incredibly unfair circumstances. Like the Spaniards, Bull Connor often blamed black people for the violence and racism that they experience. Connor "said he had never apologized for using police dogs and high powered fire hoses against civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham" ("Connor"). In fact, when Connor first instructed his men to use the fire hoses he declared, "Don't get the regular hoses, they'll just stand and look at you and take a bath. Get the high-powered ones, they'll knock a man sixty feet" ("Connor"). Connor showed no remorse in the actions that he took toward the Civil Rights demonstrators, and this vehemence stemmed from his belief in the difference and inferiority of the other.

Connor's plan to deal with the Civil Rights campaign seems especially interesting when compared to the efforts of Robert Kennedy. Both of these men held positions of power in which they could aid or fight the attempts of the protestors. As discussed above, Kennedy saw a place for black people within white society. Unfortunately, although he most likely did not realize this problem, his plan required that black people forsake their heritage, thus implicitly admitting their own inferiority. In contrast, Bull Connor did not believe that the two races could bridge their differences

and certainly should not intermingle. Therefore, he explicitly called for black people to accept their own inferiority. The race relation strategies offered by both men required that black people somehow admit or accept their own inferiority. This fact seems especially interesting because the attitudes that the men take toward the racial other play out in dramatically different ways. At first inspection, labeling Kennedy's beliefs as more ethical seems enticing because he sympathizes more with the disempowered, and clearly Kennedy acts in a more principled manner because his actions do not include the physical abuse of humans. However, although the actions of each man do concern this study, the attitudes and beliefs that give rise to those actions hold even more importance. Kennedy might not have physically attacked the protestors, but his solution to the issue of Civil Rights might, in the end, deny black people something greater than the right to vote or ride integrated city buses. Kennedy's plan required a loss of ability on the part of black people to create a self-definition. In contrast, Bull Connor, although attempting to define the role of black people in America, caused black people to more intensely identify with their own culture. This is not to say that Connor's actions were in any way better or more ethical than Kennedy's, history clearly suggests otherwise. However, this comparison may help to more fully illuminate the shortcomings in both men's approaches in order to reach the greater goal of ethically understanding the Other today.

Arguably, upon entering into mainstream white society, blacks would still experience social disadvantage and prejudice because they could never truly become white. In this case, they would perpetuate white hegemony by abandoning their heritage and encouraging their own domination. If the races remained segregated, then black

people could draw on their own identity to empower themselves and create appreciation and acceptance of their own culture. This concept might seem contradictory to the thesis of this paper, that because of its arbitrariness, race should not act as a marker of human diversity. However, because of the establishment of racism within white society, for black people to forsake a self-identification within their own race would cause cultural suicide. A total relinquishment of racial identity would allow white people the full ability to define the meaning of “blackness” in American society. Although American society has long assigned a social role to black Americans, as in the case of the Cold War era discussed earlier, by protecting a specific cultural identity black people have had the option to disbelieve and even subvert the accepted notion of “blackness.” By giving up their racial identity, black people would have no defense against hegemony.

This argument parallels that of Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X when speaking in favor of Black Power. The idea that black people must first determine their self-worth, and build power and stature for themselves independent of white society, drives the philosophies of Carmichael and Malcolm X. In a way, these two leaders agree with the strategy of Bull Connor to keep the races separate. In fact, as briefly discussed above, the motivation for Connor, Carmichael, and X all come from similar understandings of racial relations. All three men agree that American society involves a hierarchy in which one race holds power over the other. The main point of contention lies in the fact that Connor wants to keep the white race at the top of the hierarchy while Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael want to earn power for the black race. Interestingly, the solution that one man believes will keep the other suppressed is the same solution

that his other believes will lead to freedom and power. The reason for this occurrence involves the fact that both sides seek to gain power by the same means. Both the black leader, Stokely Carmichael, and the white leader, Bull Connor, believe that separation of the races, along with a focus on the differences between them, will lead to the growth of power and opportunity for each man's respective group. Therefore, the two people that seem the most ideologically opposite really think very much alike. Again, this observation serves as a particular point of interest because the two people in question, Connor and Carmichael, should have entirely different understandings of alterity if the factor of race determines a legitimate division between human groups.

The militant attitudes that Connor and Carmichael share also seem interesting when one considers their similar understandings of alterity. Although Connor actually enforced violent action and Carmichael, and Black Power, only threatened it by invoking the phrase "by any means necessary," a perception of alterity as inferior seems to have some relationship with violent action. Turning again to *The Conquest of America*, Todorov explains the violence perpetrated by the Spanish conquistadors upon the Amerindians. In one instance among many, the Spanish conquerors take an Indian man prisoner: "They do not hesitate to torture him and his family: they are hanged, their feet are scorched with burning oil, their genitals prodded with a metal rod" (97). He also details the belief of these conquerors in the superior nature of their own culture and lifestyle (76). When examining this phenomenon, one notices that each person's understanding of humanity is predicated on his or her self-understanding. In other words, if self is what defines humanity, then Other, if inferior, is less than human.

Therefore, if the Other does not attain full humanity, then one can more easily violently attack alterity based on its inhuman, or rather dehumanized, nature.

The violence associated with both Black Power, represented by Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, and the sort of white supremacy advocated by Bull Connor display the unethical aspect of viewing alterity as inferior. Simply thinking that one's culture holds superiority over another may seem innocuous, but as Todorov quotes Benjamin Constant, "Power is only too ready to represent its own excesses. . . From the recognized inferiority of one race and the superiority of another to the enslavement of the former, the distance is all too short" (*Diversity* 22). The inevitability of violent acts, whether physical or otherwise, employed by a powerful group which believes in its own supremacy seems apparent. Thus, the respective worldviews of Bull Connor and Stokely Carmichael not only invalidate each other by suggesting inherent similarities between the races, but they also expose their own shortcomings in dealing with humanity. Although people such as Robert Kennedy, who fails to see the Other as different, also fail in regards to a completely ethical understanding of otherness, they do not purposefully enact violence upon their other. In fact, unlike Bull Connor, some people explicitly seek to confront the Other through nonviolence.

JOHN LEWIS

John Lewis's integral role in the student arm of the Civil Rights movement always involved nonviolent strategies. These strategies dictated which protests he chose to join and lead, and his philosophy affected, and was affected by, the way that he understood the Other. This discussion will examine John Lewis's perception of the Other as it represented the philosophy of nonviolence. In Bevel's account of nonviolence, discussed above, he claims that "every living human being is my brother or sister," and any opposition is simply "a disagreement between brothers." This statement has direct implications in an understanding of alterity. First, it helps to define exactly who the nonviolent protestor conceives of as Other: anyone with whom he or she has a disagreement. In this instance the disagreement does not simply mean a minor argument or personal debate, but refers to a disagreement so large that one would feel compelled to actively protest, an ideological disagreement. If this definition of the other stands then, Lewis, as a nonviolent person, would perceive any person with whom he disagreed as other. The importance in this statement becomes clear when one realizes that many white people did in fact agree that blacks should have Civil Rights. The nonviolent perspective operates on the notion that eventually all people can come to the same, full knowledge. This supposition does not only deny the difference of the other in the case of the Civil Rights movement, but it denies the notion of human diversity altogether. In a sense, John Lewis, as representative of the nonviolent perspective, claims that essentially all humans share or can share similar worldviews. This idea presents the

ultimate self-projection. The possibility that all humans can share similar cognitive processes and understand the world in the same way seems to deny any element of fundamental human difference.

Each of the four leaders that this discussion examines has a different view on where to draw the lines of otherness. Robert Kennedy, Stokely Carmichael, and Eugene Connor all determine human diversity solely according to race. In contrast, John Lewis considers the opinions and worldview of each person to delineate each group. James Forman, another student activist in the 1960's, claims that Lewis's rhetoric continued to show his "growing conservatism" (453). Lewis did not speak out against whites in particular. Rather, he interested himself in striving toward the "Beloved Community" that James Lawson had taught him about at his nonviolent workshops: "I first heard about the concept of the Beloved Community through Jim Lawson. We used to speak about making Nashville a Beloved Community, a community at peace with itself. It is a sense of coming together to serve the common good" (Interview). Lewis' rhetoric did not focus on the white person as the enemy. The rhetorical concept of a Beloved Community would naturally involve both black and white citizens.

Because of this attempt at colorblindness, the lines of alterity become slightly blurred in Lewis's view. Rather than simply defining the limits of otherness along racial borders as Carmichael, Kennedy, and Connor each did, Lewis considered those who marched along side him, whether black or white, as a part of the same group: "If you were committed to the idea of seeing the spark of the sacred in every human being, no matter how vile or how violent, how could you hold yourself apart from someone else

simply because he or she was white?" (*Walking* 194). Lewis had come to identify with several white people, and these people clearly fell on the inside of his group: "During the Freedom Ride, I'd seen people like Jim Peck, Al Bigelow, and Jim Zwerg stand and suffer *with* us. We had become brothers and sisters in the struggle. We bled together. We suffered together" (*Walking* 194). This view of alterity complicates a system which designates people as "black" or "white" in order to categorize and simplify human diversity. According to Lewis's view, the mental processes and opinions of a person determines human diversity, not simply the color of a person's skin. The defining of alterity along mental lines rather than physical lines attacks the racist view that races are inherently different, and that one race is superior to another. Race may not necessarily determine the worldview of a person, as Kennedy, Carmichael, and Connor, assume. Rather, societal constraints placed upon different races more likely determine one's cognitive development. In other words, the physical aspect of race written on a person's body becomes arbitrary, and only the way in which society reacts to and affects people of different races holds significance in determining human diversity.

Lewis explicitly confronted some of the people whom he considered as the opposition in his speech during the March on Washington. In his original draft, which underwent some changes before its delivery due to its controversial nature, he challenged the modern politicians to stop making promises and truly work toward Civil Rights: "This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromises and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation. What political leader here can stand up and say, 'My party is the

party of principles?' The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland...Where is *our* party?" (*Walking* 219). Lewis explains that the opponent in the Civil Rights case entails immoral and apathetic politicians – people who have the power to make changes but choose not to. Even more than the vicious white southern racist, Lewis calls out the establishment that keeps full rights of citizenship from black people. For Lewis, one specific other is the enlightened person, the person who should understand the importance of equal rights for all humans, but does not act on that knowledge: "I want to know, which side is the federal government on?" (*Walking* 220). The speaker implies that the federal government seems to be on "the other" side, not the side of equal rights, acting not only to endorse racism but also to institutionalize it, thus making it stronger.

No, for Lewis Civil Rights is not a question of black and white, it is a question of powerful versus powerless: "We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political, and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about. In the struggle, we must seek more than civil rights; we must work for the community of love, peace and true brotherhood. Our minds, souls and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for *all people*" (*Walking* 220). For Lewis, the people, the masses, constitute the "we" when he speaks. The in group entails the large number of people willing to sacrifice and fight for equal rights. In this way, Lewis seems to overlook the differences between the many people involved in his "we." If the division really lies between the masses and those in power, then middle class whites of the north and the south, who might not have any political power, but many of whom treated black people as second class citizens, acted not on the side of the

opposition but on the side of the Civil Rights campaigners. Lewis's rhetoric refuses to see the differences that exist between groups within the masses, instead focusing on the politicians as the enemy. The goal for the movement exists in moving toward "the community of love, peace and true brotherhood," which assumes that all people can come to understand the truth of equal rights. Lewis projects his own beliefs onto the masses, making it seem that all Americans are engaged in the battle for equality while the political leaders keep those wishes unfulfilled.

Lewis's definition of alterity differs from Kennedy's in that Kennedy understood race to constitute a primary factor of human division – white America invited black America into its culture and lifestyle to share in its advantages. Normal, everyday white Americans had bought into this lifestyle and the American Dream, and black people could join them. In contrast, Lewis seemed to see all of the masses in America pulling toward one ideal against elitist opposition. Of course race had started the movement, but the ultimate goal entailed true brotherhood for everyone, not just equal rights for black people. In both cases the black culture stood to lose its unique identity. By following Kennedy, black people could slowly assimilate into whiteness until black culture had died, and everyone lived "happily" in a white mainstream American culture. If the movement followed the advice of Lewis, then white culture alone might not control this shared and universal lifestyle, but still, all cultural uniqueness would melt away. The individual characteristics of both white and black cultures would lose out to the universal "Beloved Community." Either way, black people would lose their cultural identity

while each person denied the difference of the Other in the name of a homogeneous equality.

It is important to note here that John Lewis, and his struggle toward the “Beloved Community,” did seem to understand that the problem of Civil Rights was not that one race held superiority over the other, but that race created an issue at all. The Other three leaders in this study attempted to solve the problem by somehow balancing racial relations, whether toward equality, separation, or hierarchy. However, Lewis’s goal entailed the erasure of race as a factor in determining human diversity, and I argue that this goal did indeed need addressing. In fact, the problem of racial inequality in America still needs attention. The fact that Robert Kennedy and John Lewis both reacted toward the issue of race in similar ways, both urging people toward a more homogeneous and accepting society, insinuates that the actual color of their skin did not differentiate them from each other at all. While it may be true that the two men did differ in their understandings of what an equal community might look like, one can best explain these differences in light of each man’s social experience. Although Kennedy and Lewis did have different social experiences because they differed in race, the actual color of each man’s skin did not directly determine their respective socializations. Rather, societal reactions to each man’s race determined the experiences that they faced. In other words, Robert Kennedy’s white skin did not cause him to believe that white America constituted normality, but the way in which American society had coded whiteness as normal dictated that belief. Undoubtedly, throughout the lives of both Kennedy and Lewis each experienced different reactions to his race. Kennedy most likely never had

to confront his whiteness because he learned that he was not white but “normal.” In contrast, Lewis most likely confronted his race daily because of constant reminders within a segregated society that he belonged outside of the norm. Because Kennedy rarely if ever confronted his race, he could easily believe that to invite blacks into white society could offer a viable solution for equality. He never had to consider what the option would force black people to forsake. Furthermore, John Lewis could understand the freedom of a community in which no person ever dealt with racial issues because of the experiences he had involving his race. Therefore, one can see that certain differences between John Lewis and Robert Kennedy existed not because of their different races but because of reactions to those races. One cannot deny the fact that racialism long ago forced some people to determined human diversity according to race. However, by examining the actions and experiences of people from each race, the arbitrariness of the original division of humans along racial lines becomes evident. The formulation, “people of different races *are* different,” is incorrect. A more accurate statement might read, “people of different races *are caused* to be different.”

Having distinguished between a belief in inherent differences between races and differences that become realized through social interaction based on race, the position toward race assumed in this paper may need some explanation as well. One might argue that if race does not constitute a viable marker for determining human diversity, then it does not make sense for this paper to focus upon race in determining the differences between the four leaders discussed. This statement does provide insight into the very heart of this discussion. The key element in answering this criticism revolves around the

point of view of each individual speaker. The four rhetors discussed here have a certain relationship to and belief about race and how it functions in American society.

Therefore, the fact that race seems arbitrary and incorrectly used as a marker of human difference does not matter in the study of these individuals. Although speaking of the Other in terms of black or white should not make sense, each person determines for himself or herself who is other and how to deal with that other. Therefore, a discussion of alterity and how one encounters it must center around the definition of the Other as given by the subject of the study. The four men, to a greater or lesser degree, perceived a distinct line of otherness drawn between black people and white people, and the comparisons that this essay makes must derive from the perceptions of those men.

Furthermore, in discussing the shortcomings of John Lewis, specifically, the assertion that a "Beloved Community," consisting of a homogeneous human culture not based upon race, denies the unique aspects of each race seems problematic. For, if race should not act as a boundary of diversity, then how could one speak of the unique and enjoyable characteristics of the different races? Again, I assert that the different aspects of each race have come about due to the social contexts in which each racial culture has evolved. A person does not have certain special cultural characteristics simply because of his or her skin color. Rather, one gains those characteristics as s/he experiences socialization. Therefore, the development of each race's identity and general personality has occurred because of the historical experiences of that particular race and not because people of a certain race share certain physical characteristics. Because of this occurrence, we can discuss the differences and unique attributes of each race as derived

from social experience. However, rather than focusing on race as the reason for those qualities, scholars can discuss the unique qualities of a cultural group that happen to share the same race. Certainly a white person can understand and experience black culture if s/he grows up and develops within that culture, and the same is true for a black person in white culture. The difference might occur in the way that a person of a different race might receive treatment from other individuals, but again, this failure does not stem from the person's race directly but from a reaction to that race. When Cleveland Sellers asserted, "It was obvious that [whites] did not and probably could not possess Black Consciousness" (157), the reason for this inability came not from an inherent difference tied directly to skin color, but rather, white people would never experience the same effects and responses that black skin evoked. The difference lay not in the relationship of a person to his or her skin, but in the relationship between a person and others' attitudes toward his or her skin.

John Lewis seems to envision an America with one mind and one spirit – the spirit of equality. One might think that this spirit of equality would entail the parity of *different* groups of people, especially the different races. However, if race itself does not make sense as a category of human diversity, then Lewis's scheme gains equality by homogenizing every person into the "Beloved Community." The community does not represent a place where many people of different perspectives enjoy and celebrate their differences through equality, but it presents a place where each person has come to a realization of the "truth" that all humans are fundamentally the same. If America could genuinely attain this goal, then those opposing the movement would have to become like

those within the movement: “I continued to believe that the American government, along with American society at large, would ultimately respond and open itself up and embrace *all* of its people” (Lewis *Walking* 366). This assumption by Lewis reveals a projection of self upon the other – the other is clearly equal but not different. By viewing alterity in this way, Lewis sees the potential of the other to become like himself. Nonviolence sees every living human as “my brother or sister.” It therefore denies the existence of true difference between others, and perceives alterity as essentially the same as oneself but lacking a full realization of its potential. As a result, the other becomes an “imperfect state of oneself” instead of something altogether different. Lewis and the nonviolence he represents fail to ethically encounter the other in Todorov’s terms.

Like Kennedy, Lewis sees his other, the person who resists black rights, as a potential self. The other does not represent something altogether different but only an immature or undeveloped version of Lewis himself. In this case, Lewis denies the difference that Todorov defines as essential to an ethical understanding of the Other. As the SNCC leader and many others understood the situation, the question of Civil Rights did not present a situation in which one could both agree and disagree ethically. Rather, the need for Civil Rights and the equality of all Americans and all humans stood as a clear and universal truth. Therefore, those on the outside of the movement, or those against the movement, had simply not realized a full understanding of the truth. This relationship with the other mirrors Kennedy’s invitation to blacks to enter into mainstream American life.

Although both Kennedy and Lewis employed similar tactics in order to achieve Civil Rights, the two differed in their fundamental reasons for their actions. Kennedy understood himself as benevolently inviting black people to take part in the advantages that mainstream white American offered. For Kennedy, the "Beloved Community" already existed within the society of the United States, and black people had only to enter into it. The attorney general thought that once black people assimilated to white society, then mainstream America could absorb the differences between the races, as black people realized their full potential. In contrast, John Lewis believed that the "Beloved Community" would represent a place where blacks and whites both reached a plane of higher knowledge. For Kennedy, American life represented a universal good that others, not yet fully aware of that good, could eventually attain. The difference and complication between Kennedy and Lewis occurs when one understands that for Lewis to understand the other as both equal and different, he would have to embrace the other's belief that Lewis himself was inferior.

To act ethically John Lewis did not have to accept his own inferiority, but in order to recognize the other's perspective as equal and different, he would have had to allow that a belief in the inherent inferiority of blacks constituted a viable option for some people. This situation parallels Todorov's assessment of European and Amerindian relations in *The Conquest of America*. The criticism that John Lewis may have misperceived the Other seems as insensitive as if Todorov would have asserted that the Amerindians failed to fully understand the other because they did not accept the European attitude of superiority as different but equal to their own perspective.

Therefore, a major question concerning the way in which Lewis interacted with the other involves the implications of how a minority or disenfranchised group encounters the Other. Most writings on alterity concern how the dominant people group perceives and deals with a marginalized group of people. In this sense, many of those writings themselves engage in a type of ethnocentrism. By solely focusing on the ethics of Europeans encountering Amerindians, as Todorov does in *Conquest of America*, or the West encountering the East, as Said does in *Orientalism*, even the authors of these books fail to adhere to their own ethical standards. One can easily claim that a powerful group of people has an ethical obligation to respect a less powerful people as equal and different. However, does the marginalized group of people act unethically by understanding themselves as morally superior? The dominant group may believe in their own technological superiority, and through this belief they might encourage the “inferior” people to better themselves by becoming more like their technologically advanced cousins. Scholars would call and have called this strategy ethnocentrism. However, if a marginalized group believes in its own moral superiority, and encourages its brutal and technologically superior other to attempt to reach its potential ethically, would we still call this ethnocentrism?

The answer seems to be a clear “no.” One cannot indict a human group for endeavoring to defend against its own physical or cultural enslavement. Demanding respect from (and equality with) another culture does not devalue that other culture. Although Lewis does project a self-image upon his other, he does so in order that the other might not regard his culture as inferior. One is not obligated to regard as ethically

equal a culture which considers itself superior to all others. Indeed, as Todorov claims, cultures generally assert superiority in technological, often communicative, terms, and white culture has long held power because it controls means of communication.

However, he also makes sure to note that “technological progress, as we know only too well today, does not involve a superiority on the level of moral and social values”

(*Conquest* 252). So, in the end, out of the four leaders examined in this study, John

Lewis seems the closest to an ethical understanding of the Other. He denies the legitimacy of race in determining human diversity, and he does not base his self-projection upon technological superiority but on the reaching of a higher ethical standard.

CONCLUSION

By studying four public leaders of the Civil Rights era, Robert Kennedy, Stokely Carmichael, John Lewis, and Bull Connor, this paper has arrived at several key conclusions regarding interactions with alterity and the role of race in determining human diversity. By juxtaposing and comparing the examinations of each man, one observes that surprisingly similar approaches toward the Other emerge. Instead of John Lewis and Stokely Carmichael taking a similar approach, Lewis most resembles Kennedy and Carmichael most resembles Connor. One might anticipate seeing more similarity between Lewis and Carmichael because the two men fought for the same goal: black rights and equality. The two men even served in the same organization, both acting as head SNCC at different times. However, Stokely Carmichael and John Lewis appear to understand the Other in drastically different ways.

Lewis, like Kennedy, imposes a self-projection upon the people not in his human group. Although John Lewis and Robert Kennedy define alterity in different ways, they react to the Other comparably. Lewis draws lines of otherness according to the opinions and attitudes of each person. If a person shows interest in creating and furthering equality, then Lewis considers that person as a part of his group. Kennedy, on the other hand, implicitly states that only white people constitute normalcy, but he invites black people to join in mainstream, white society. Hence, the attorney general understands human diversity in terms of race. But even with different definitions of alterity, the two men encounter the Other by allowing equality but not difference. Both Kennedy and

Lewis envision a society in which color does not matter. Both men invite the Other to enter into a more enlightened state. For Kennedy, white society constitutes that state, and for Lewis, it is the color-blind “Beloved Community,” in which all people have and celebrate equality. Although the men’s separate ideals differ, they both encourage the person outside of their group to come in and enjoy what amounts to “true knowledge.” This knowledge involves becoming like the person who offers it, and therein lies the self-projection.

By inviting black people into white society, Kennedy basically asks black people to become white, thus forsaking their cultural and racial heritage. Similarly, Lewis asks anyone not interested in racial equality to understand the world like Lewis himself: give up racism and embrace the higher moral and intellectual ground of equality and nonviolence. As stated above, Bevel claims that the philosophy of nonviolence explains how “every living human being is my brother or sister,” and any opposition is simply “a disagreement between brothers.” That one person in the disagreement may not believe or understand that he shares in this universal brother or sisterhood does undermine its truth. In Lewis’s ideal community, everyone embraces this brotherhood. In the same way, Kennedy believes that the American democratic social system can right the ills of racism if only black people will willingly buy into its ideals.

Both Lewis and Kennedy do not see alterity as something different, but as something potentially like themselves. America can and should achieve equality. Of course, the problem occurs when one must decide which equality Americans should achieve, Lewis’s “Beloved Community” or Kennedy’s benevolent white society. The

two men did not have the same goal in mind, as John Lewis clearly states, “Mr. Kennedy is trying to take the revolution out of the streets and put it into the courts. Listen, Mr. Kennedy... The black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won’t be a ‘cooling-off’ period” (*Walking* 200). Although Lewis directly mentions the president, John F. Kennedy, rather than his brother Robert, the message for the president and his staff stands: a hollow and patronizing invitation to join the white American mainstream will not satisfy the protestors. The two men intended to use the same strategy to realize fundamentally different goals because their attitudes toward alterity coincided based on self-projection. However, that projection of self emerged from inherently different self-definitions, creating similar paths to different ends.

Stokely Carmichael and Bull Connor also took related paths to different destinations. In contrast to Kennedy and Lewis, these two men saw the Other as different but not equal. Each man drew lines of alterity according to race. The two men differed mainly in that one of them fought for white superiority and one fought for black superiority. However, both men felt that the separation of the races played a key role in the retention of power by their respective races. Interestingly, both men also assumed that separation of the races would put the other at a disadvantage. Although Stokely Carmichael and other advocates of Black Power taught that their philosophy encouraged a new way of thinking, a type of “black consciousness,” they remained stuck in a typical mind frame. America’s racist history had taught both black and white people that one race must always dominate and that no room existed for the races to live harmoniously

and equally. By attempting to replace white power with Black Power, the advocates of such a philosophy worked within the exact same system as white racists. Black Power advocates did not revolutionize the way that Americans thought about race. In fact, they reinforced it. These people did not attempt to truly dismantle the hierarchy in which they lived; they only attempted to move up within it. This approach to racial relations shows ethnocentrism in an unusual way because in this case the marginalized people have become trapped within the dominating social worldview which they have learned. They attempt only to temporarily change their social position, leaving themselves open to later attack, rather than urge for a fundamental change in the way that Americans view and treat the different races. This strategy actually benefits their opponents because they already have power. If the hierarchy remains, then the group with the most power remains at the top, and nothing short of a revolution will wrest that power away.

Another aspect of the relationship between the ideologies of Bull Connor and Stokely Carmichael involves the fact that the men's similar perceptions of alterity actually undermines their understanding of the other. If each man thinks that the other group represents inferiority, then one might expect the men to think differently from each other. In that case, one man actually could attain superiority, and the other man would simply be wrong in his belief in his own supremacy. The very fact that the two men share approaches toward the other group shows that race truly does not mark a legitimate difference between humans. One cannot prove his or her superiority over someone exactly like himself. The cognitive systems that the two men use do not differ in essential ways, only the specific values of preferring either black or white skin do not

align. This occurrence shows the arbitrariness of race. The fundamental difference between the two men comes down to the skin color with which each man happens to have been born.

Although the relationship between Connor and Carmichael seems to show the arbitrary nature of race in determining human difference, American society has reacted differently to different races throughout its history. Therefore, race itself, the actual color of one's skin, does not truly demark one human as unlike another, but the experiences of people from each race have created a certain racial culture within each group. It is important to distinguish clearly between "race" and "racial culture" because the former entails an arbitrary physical characteristic that one gains at birth, and the latter refers to the social attitudes and ties that have developed as different skin colors have invoked different reactions from society at large. Because of the American cultural emphasis placed upon race, different racial cultures have developed, and these different cultures are important and unique. Because these racial cultures have developed, society must deal with them properly in order to ensure that each race receives fair and ethical treatment as a human group. Relying on the theoretical foundation set forth in this discussion, ethical encounters with humanity must include an understanding of each culture as equal and different. In this case, ethical behavior entails accepting and celebrating the differences that have developed between racial cultures, and understanding that race itself did not cause these distinctions. Comprehending that the natural color of one's skin does nothing in the way of actually creating human differences automatically undercuts the argument that one race holds innate superiority

over any other. Even so, the effects of racism in America have left the United States to deal with distinct racial cultures. Now, instead of denying that those cultures exist, we must realize that they represent products, not of innate racial difference, but of differing socializations. Many years of history have already drawn the lines of alterity, whether arbitrary or not. With that work done for us, humans must endeavor to ethically encounter each culture with which we come into contact.

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VITA

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